Mentoring At-Risk Girls: Necessary Conditions and Best Practices

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Since the 1990s, mentoring has grown in popularity as an intervention strategy for helping at-risk girls. Just because a strategy is popular, however, does not mean that it is effective. This research paper analyzes the literature on mentoring programs and examines a specific case study in order to address the question, is mentoring a useful form of intervention for at-risk girls? What are its advantages and limitations? Under what circumstances can and should mentoring be utilized? I argue that the question of whether or not mentoring is effective does not yield a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer; rather, the value of mentoring is contingent upon an organization's use of certain necessary conditions and best practices. These conditions and practices are: 1) having clearly defined objectives and outcomes, 2) requiring a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors, 3) maintaining a high level of selectivity of mentors, 4) carefully considering the specific identities and needs of the mentees, based on factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, and 5) addressing both the behavioral and structural forces that affect mentees by simultaneously providing services and working for social change. While some of these can be considered best practices in that they will help to make a mentoring program more effective, others are absolutely necessary to ensure that the program is having a positive impact; without them, mentoring can actually have the opposite of the intended effect and do more harm than good for the at-risk girls.

In this research paper, I first provide background information on My Sister's Circle, a small mentoring organization which is used here as a case study and complement to secondary research and literature on other organizations. I then explore the general concepts of "at-risk" and "mentoring" in order to highlight the variability of these terms, and to define how they are used in the context of this paper. Finally, I individually examine each of the necessary conditions and best practices outlined above to show how and why they are so critical to the success of a

mentoring organization. Through this research, I contribute to the overall body of knowledge and literature that analyzes intervention strategies for helping at-risk girls, showing how mentoring programs can be used effectively in targeting the needs of this population.

Background on My Sister's Circle

My Sister's Circle (MSC) is a comprehensive, relationship-based program designed to mentor girls from disadvantaged Baltimore City neighborhoods during their challenging transition to middle school, throughout high school, and into college. MSC was founded in 2001, and today serves over one hundred girls, ranging from fifth through twelfth grades, enrolled in approximately forty middle and high schools.

The primary goal of MSC is to increase college attendance among girls who, based on several risk factors, are less likely to succeed academically. Intermediate goals include increasing girls': 1) participation in after-school activities; 2) social support; 3) self-efficacy; 4) school attendance and grades; 5) social competencies; 6) educational options; 7) participation in summer camps/jobs; and 8) practice of healthy habits. Core components of MSC's program are: matching each girl with a mentor; providing academic support programs; organizing cultural, educational, and recreational events; placing students in summer camps, jobs, and internships; offering testing and guidance to girls and their families as they maneuver the middle and high school application process; and connecting students with college counselors to assist with the challenging college application and selection process. This research paper uses specific examples from MSC to complement the research and literature on other mentoring organizations.

Defining "At-Risk"

There is no singular or definitive meaning of the label "at-risk" or "at-risk youth," and yet how it is defined and used by a nonprofit organization forms the foundation of that

organization's work. Kazdin (1993) defines at-risk at its most basic level – as the "increased likelihood over base rates in the population that a particular, undesirable outcome will occur" (129). There is no consensus, however, on what the "particular, undesirable outcome" is; the definition begs the question, at risk for what? For some researchers and organizations, at-risk youth are those involved or at risk for involvement with the juvenile justice systems (Ruffolo et. al., 2004). For others, the term applies to youth who are at-risk for dropping out of school or, more generally, not living up to their academic potential (Rodriguez, 1990). For others still, at-risk refers to the increased likelihood of unwanted teenage pregnancy and/or sexually-transmitted diseases (Beier, et. al., 2000). Of course these different lenses for conceptualizing at-risk youth are not mutually exclusive; many youth are simultaneously at-risk for all of the undesirable outcomes listed above. Conducting sound research and providing effective services, however, both require a clear, concrete definition of the "particular, undesirable outcome" that certain youth are at-risk for experiencing.

The literature on at-risk youth does not merely define the term; it also examines the various categories of risk factors. Risk factors are not the same as outcomes, nor do risk factors alone lead to outcomes. Kominski, Jamieson, and Martinez (2001) explain that "risk factors are not exclusively outcomes of the personal characteristics of the child or their family, but can be considered either precursors or outcomes of other risk factors" (2). Risk factors for at-risk youth can be divided into three basic categories: environmental, individual, and structural. In terms of environmental risk factors, Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001) explain that exposure to certain environments or situations may put children and youth at risk; these can include general environments such as impoverished communities, unsafe neighborhoods, and under-resourced

schools, and specific situations such as single-parent homes and homes with abusive or neglectful caretakers.

Individual risk factors focus on the characteristics and behaviors of a specific youth; these can include low self-esteem, a tendency toward aggression, and poor academic performance (including poor attendance, disruptive behavior, and lack of involvement in school activities). This category also includes the actual engagement in risky behaviors, such as using alcohol or drugs, or involvement in unsafe sexual activity (McElwee, 2007). Finally, structural risk factors refer to those collective risks associated with possessing a marginalized status in society due to oppression and discrimination based on gender, race, class, sexuality, or some other identity marker (McElwee, 2007).

For the purpose of this research paper, it is critical to note that some risk factors are gender-specific, and hence gender must be taken into account in any intervention strategy. For example, in addition to their marginalized status as female, young girls are uniquely at risk because of factors such as early puberty (which has been shown to increase risk for delinquency) and violence and sexual abuse (which young girls experience at much higher rates than young boys) (Zahn, et. al., 2008). As discussed in greater depth below, gender must be taken into account when considering the needs of at-risk youth.

How a researcher or organization defines "at-risk" – and which risk factors are then targeted – affects everything from who the target population is, to the types of programs and services implemented, to the desired outcomes and standards for evaluating success. As we have seen, there is no single way to define being "at-risk," and there are no "correct" risk factors that organizations should target. It is absolutely critical, however, for an organization to clearly delineate its conceptualization of the term; an organization has a responsibility to define both the

undesirable outcomes to prevent and the desirable outcomes to be fostered by intervention efforts.

My Sister's Circle illustrates how the definition of at-risk youth an organization espouses has a direct effect on every facet of the organization's programs. This organization defines "at-risk" entirely in academic terms; its goal is to target girls who are at-risk for dropping out of school and not fulfilling their academic potential. This academic conceptualization of "at-risk" has become the starting point from which other decisions about the organization's programs are made. For example, because the goal is to reduce school drop-out rates, the organization works specifically with schools in Baltimore City where that drop-out rate is above average. In addition, to be accepted into the program participants must be referred by teachers who see academic potential in them, but worry that their circumstances might hinder this potential. Because the organization defines "at-risk" in academic terms, its programs focus specifically on providing educational enrichment, academic support, and school counseling. The responsibilities of the mentors are also affected. They are expected to do more than spend quality time with their mentees; they also monitor school attendance and grades, and serve as models and motivators for academic achievement.

My Sister's Circle's definition of "at-risk" also plays a large role in its evaluation process. Sloat, Audas, and Willms (2007) have created an assessment schema that divides outcomes into three categories: personal development (including self-esteem, locus of control, and social support), social behavior (including relationships with peers and pro-social behavior) and school outcomes (including academic achievement, school conduct, and engagement in school life and activities). While MSC certainly hopes to improve the lives of the girls in all of these areas, it measures its achievements specifically on school outcomes. Success is defined as

supporting a girl such that she graduates from high school and enrolls in a college or university. What we see is that how an organization defines "at-risk" guides every facet of the organization, from programs to evaluation. An organization that labels a young persona "at-risk" because she has been involved in the juvenile justice system will obviously provide different types of programming and mentoring experiences, and it will evaluate success quite differently. The overall point is that it is critical that any mentoring organization that targets at-risk youth clearly delineate how it is conceptualizing that term, and use that conceptualization as a guide for all others pieces of the organization.

<center>Defining "Mentoring"</center>

One strategy of intervention for at-risk youth that is increasingly common is mentoring. According to Dappen and Isernhagen (2005), the word "mentor" first appeared in the Greek poet Homer's epic poem "The Odyssey"; before Odysseus leaves home to go on his journey, he chooses a man named "Mentor" to be the guardian for his son. The most basic definition of mentoring is "the process whereby an experienced individual transmits knowledge to a protégé" (Blechman, 1992, 161). Mentoring, then, can be utilized in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. While the phrase "experienced individual" is rather broad, in the case of mentoring programs for at-risk youth studies have shown that mentoring is most effective when the "experienced individual" is a stable, caring adult (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). "The theoretical base for mentoring is linked to the importance of a significant adult in a child's development" (21). While there are some peer mentoring programs, at this point they are not well-documented or sufficiently evaluated as effective for helping at-risk youth. This research paper looks specifically at adult-youth mentoring, as defined as the stable presence of a caring adult in the life of an at-risk youth.

Mentoring programs can be implemented in a variety of settings. Most programs targeting at-risk youth are either community-based or school-based. A community-based program is one managed and administered by an agency or nonprofit organization not affiliated with a specific school, while a school-based program is one run by a school, within its own setting. In general, the United States has seen a significant increase in the amount of school-based mentoring programs in the last ten to fifteen years. Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) report a 40% growth in mentoring programs fro 1996 to 2001; almost three-quarters of that growth was in school-based programs. Currently, 39% of mentoring programs in the United States are community-based, and 29% are school-based. The increase in school-based mentoring can be attributed to several practical reasons: more students can be served in the setting where they already are, parents do not have to participate in the referral process, school-based mentoring programs are often more cost-effective, and the school setting provides a comfort to some mentors who might not otherwise volunteer (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). My Sister's Circle is an example of a community-based mentoring program, but this research paper examines both types of programs, particularly because they are often not mutually exclusive; community-based programs often work in close cooperation with the schools where mentees attend, and school-based programs often enlist the assistance of outside agencies to plan and implement their strategies.

As was the case with defining "at-risk," it is essential for organizations managing mentoring programs to have a clear sense of what they understand "mentoring" to be. If an organization defines mentoring as this research paper does, then all mentoring relationship will always be between adults and youth. Some organizations, however, may choose to adopt a broader definition of the term, leaving open the possibility of experimenting with peer

mentoring. In addition, delineating a clear conceptualization of "mentoring" allows an organization to engage in reflection and dialogue about what it envisions the mentoring relationships to look like. For example, I have defined mentoring as the "stable presence of a caring adult in the life of an at-risk youth," but even this definition invokes additional questioning. How do we define "stable presence"? How often should the mentor and mentee meet? How long should the relationship last? What actions or attitudes make the mentor "caring"? It is important for organizations to thoughtfully address these kinds of questions, taking into account what the research and literature on mentoring has found to be most effective. It is to those necessary conditions and best practices that make a mentoring program successful that we now turn.

<div align="center">Necessary Conditions and Best Practices</div>

While the number of mentoring programs in the United States has increased immensely in the past fifteen years, an intervention strategy's popularity and prevalence does not automatically translate into effectiveness and positive impact. There have been several studies affirming the effectiveness of mentoring programs on specific risk factors for disadvantaged youth. For example, Tierney and Grossman (1995) found a correlation between mentoring programs and both improved student grades and reduced use of drugs and alcohol. Mecca's (2001) research argues that mentoring programs help at-risk youth stay in school and lessen the probability that youth will become involved in gang activity. Other studies show that mentoring programs reduce the risk of teen pregnancy (Jekeilek et. al., 2002), and lead to higher levels of self-confidence and improved relationships with both adults and peers (Curtis and Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). Finally, a study conducted by the Girls Study Group under the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that "girls

who had a caring adult in their lives during adolescence were less likely to commit status or property offenses, sell drugs, join gangs, or commit simple or aggravated assault during adolescence" (Zahn et. al., 2008, 4).

While all of this research seems to indicate that mentoring is, without question, an effective form of intervention, Rhodes (2002) has criticized much of the research on mentoring programs for lacking rigor and specific evaluation criteria. In addition, because no two mentoring programs are exactly the same, it is problematic to make any kind of blanket statement or evaluation of mentoring programs as a whole. In questioning whether or not mentoring programs are of value in working with at-risk girls, I argue that the answer is not a simple "yes" or "no." In fact, the real question is not whether or not mentoring programs are effective, but rather, what specific characteristics of such programs work? Which ones do not? And under what circumstances? I argue that the effectiveness of a mentoring program is contingent upon the program's use of certain necessary conditions and best practices.

The two necessary conditions I outline are 1) having clearly defined objectives and outcomes and 2) requiring a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors. Without these two conditions firmly in place, a mentoring program actually risks doing more harm than good in the lives of at-risk girls. In addition, I outline three best practices that mentoring organizations should utilize in order to be as effective as possible. These practices are 1) maintaining a high level of selectivity of mentors, 2) carefully considering the specific identities and needs of the mentees, based on factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, and 3) addressing both the behavioral and structural forces that affect mentees by simultaneously providing services and working for social change. While none of these necessary conditions or best practices is

sufficient on its own, together they form the foundation of a solid, effective mentoring program

for at-risk girls.

<center>Necessary Condition #1: Clearly Defining Objectives and Outcomes</center>

When many people think of mentoring programs for at-risk youth, they picture the

mentor and the mentee going out for an ice cream cone or visiting a local attraction. While

mentoring pairs often engage in such leisure activities together, there is much more to a

successful mentoring relationship than sharing a sundae. Many people believe that the mere

presence of an attentive adult is enough to positively impact the life of an at-risk youth; however,

research shows that in order to see measurable results in the lives of the mentees, both the

mentoring program as a whole and the specific mentoring pair need to be working toward clearly

defined objectives and outcomes (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005).

This is the case with any kind of project or program: the goals of the program can be

abstract and lofty, but these goals must be accompanied by specific objectives that can be

measured. There are a number of reasons why this is so important and why I label this a

necessary condition for any mentoring program. Overall, the clearly defined objectives and

outcomes form the foundation of the mentoring program; they guide every other aspect of it.

Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) write that objectives and outcomes "provide direction in the

recruitment of students and mentors, the selection of activities in which they are involved, and

evaluation of program success" (23). In other words, without clear objectives almost any youth

could be recruited to be a mentee; defining the program's outcomes enables the administrators to

identify which youth will benefit most from the experience. In addition, objectives form the

foundation of the actual mentoring sessions. Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) argue that "regularly

scheduling mentoring sessions that have clear agendas and expectations is critical to the success

of any mentoring program" (23-24). There is certainly nothing wrong with a mentor taking her

mentee for an ice cream cone; however, such experiences do not take place merely for the sake

of themselves – they are still working toward some clearly defined objective. The most effective

mentoring sessions are those that are directly aligned with the objectives the mentoring program

is working to achieve.

Perhaps the most important reason for having clearly defined outcomes and objectives

relates to the notion of evaluation. Evaluation is absolutely critical for a mentoring program;

without it, there is simply no way to judge a program's impact. A mentoring program needs to

have some way of measuring and ensuring that it is indeed having an impact, and that the impact

is a positive one. It is entirely possible that a mentoring program could be doing more harm than

good in the lives of at-risk youth, and the only way to determine this is through evaluation.

Without clearly defined objectives and outcomes, there would not be anything to measure, or any

standard against which to judge success.

What should these outcomes and objectives look like? How should they be evaluated?

While it depends on the specific context of each mentoring program, there are two general rules

to follow; these rules will help a mentoring program be as comprehensive as possible in creating

its objectives and subsequent evaluation. First, when forming its anticipated objectives, a

mentoring program should consider all of the types of objectives that are relevant to its goals. In

The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing (5th Edition), Jane Geever outlines four

types of objectives. Note that all four types are measurable and assessable. Behavior objectives

are those that predict a specific human action – for example, that at least half of all participants

in a mentoring program will see a positive increase in their grade point average. Performance

objectives add a specific time frame to the behavioral objectives – for example, that the mentee's

grade point average will rise within twelve months of the start of the mentoring relationship. Process objectives are those that measure the manner or method in which an activity or process occurs. Finally, product objectives examine any tangible, concrete items that will result from the program. As mentioned above, not all of these types of objectives will be relevant for every mentoring program; however, in order to ensure that the mentoring relationships are as effective as possible, mentoring programs should carefully consider a wide range of potential objectives that relate to their goals.

The second rule refers to how mentoring programs should go about evaluating their impact. Again, evaluation methods depend heavily on the specifics of the mentoring program, but a good way to ensure that evaluation is as comprehensive as possible is to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative data attempts to maintain objectivity and is often in the form of numbers and statistics; for example, a mentoring program might track exactly how many times a mentoring pair met over the course of a six month period, and how long each of those meetings lasted. Qualitative data is more subjective but is also richer and more contextual; it is often in the form of a detailed description or personal evaluation. For example, a program might ask each mentor to keep a written journal reflecting on the mentoring sessions and noting any perceptible changes in the attitudes or behaviors of the mentee. Quantitative and qualitative measures have both advantages and disadvantages, so a mentoring program should utilize both in order to obtain the most complete understanding possible of its impact on the at-risk youth it serves. Considering all of the types of measurable outcomes and utilizing both quantitative and qualitative evaluative data can give a mentoring organization a more complete picture of the impact it is having on its target population.

In addition, the objectives and outcomes a program chooses to utilize should not be generated randomly or chosen arbitrarily; instead, they stem directly from how the organization defines the term "at-risk." For example, if a program defines a youth as "at-risk" through the lens of unwanted teenage pregnancies, then the mentoring program's objectives should align accordingly; one anticipated outcome of the mentoring relationship might be that the mentee not experience an unwanted pregnancy throughout the course of the relationship, and the expectation of one of the mentoring sessions might be to discuss safe sex practices. While any objective within reason is acceptable, I encourage organizations to focus on outcomes that are backed up by the current research on mentoring. For example, McElwee (2007) has demonstrated the importance of an at-risk youth having a role model who values school and encourages a positive attitude toward learning in generating confidence and resilience in that youth. The Girls Study Group from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that girls who experience higher levels of school connectedness and school success are less likely to join gangs or become involved in aggravated assault. Studies such as these solidify a mentoring organization's decision to focus on academic outcomes and objectives; research shows that achieving those outcomes leads to a positive impact for at-risk girls.

My Sister's Circle provides a concrete example of how clearly defining outcomes and objectives helps to ensure that a mentoring organization is successful and effective. MSC's overarching goal is to ensure that at-risk girls from Baltimore City achieve their full academic potential. The coordinating objectives, then, are to ensure that each participant stays in school, receives academic support and shows improvement, and eventually graduates from high school and enrolls in college. MSC is able to measure and evaluate its success, then, using quantifiable tools and data such as grades and graduation rates, in addition to anecdotal evidence from

mentors, teachers, and other observers. In addition, the way that MSC defines its objectives

greatly influences the expectations it has for its mentors and the types of relationships mentors

have with mentees. For example, at the beginning of every school year the organization contacts

each girl's parents, encouraging them to sign a waiver giving their child's mentor access to her

grades and other school information. This allows the mentor to keep track of the girl's academic

progress, and to intervene quickly if any problems arise. Many mentees have received academic

support services more quickly and efficiently than they might have otherwise because the mentor

had access to the information needed to start a discussion about the mentee's performance in a

particular subject. MSC's mentors are also encouraged to be in continual contact with their

mentees' guidance counselors, so that they can work together to help the girls achieve their full

potential in the classroom. As explained by Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001), the idea is not

that the mentor becomes a tutor for the mentee; rather, the mentor serves as a role model and an

encourager *specifically in terms of academic success.* My Sister's Circle illustrates the fact that

having clearly defined objectives is critical because it shapes the expectations and results of the

mentoring relationships.

This is not to say that a mentoring program's objectives should or need to be imposed

onto the target population. In fact, Diane de Anda's (2001) qualitative evaluation of a mentor

program for at-risk girls in California is an example of how mentees can actually be involved in

the objective-setting process. While the organization itself set the anticipated outcomes for the

program as a whole, one of the first guided mentoring sessions asked both mentors and mentees

to outline and then discuss their individual expectations for the mentoring relationship. Together

the pairs then generated their own personal list of objectives, in alignment with the

organization's. Not only did this generate positive communication between the mentor and

mentee – encouraging both to open up honestly to the other – but it also ensured that subsequent mentoring sessions were more focused on an end result, as both parties were fully aware of what they hoped that result would be.

Overall, it is absolutely critical that a mentoring organization clearly delineate its anticipated objectives and outcomes. Doing so forms a foundation on which to build the specific components of the program, and gives the organization substantial measures to use for evaluating success. Such evaluation is essential to ensuring that the mentoring relationships are having a positive impact on the target population; without clear objectives and evaluative components, the organization has no way of knowing that the work it is doing is having the intended effects.

Necessary Condition #2: Requiring a Long-Term, Consistent Commitment from Mentors

Rhodes (2002) argues that "the longer the mentor-mentee relationship is maintained, the more it will yield positive growth" (24). Similarly, research by Southwick et. al. (2006) indicates that "the most successful mentors are those who invest time and energy and have frequent and prolonged contact with the children they guide" (577). Such research demonstrates the critical importance of a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors, and yet maintaining this commitment is one of the biggest challenges mentoring organizations face. While other types of intervention programs only rely on volunteers for short-term help or basic tasks, mentoring programs depend on volunteer mentors as the backbone of their intervention efforts. It is vital that mentoring organizations find ways to recruit and maintain mentors who are willing and able to commit to the program consistently over an expanded period of time.

Why exactly is this long-term, consistent commitment so important, important enough that I label it a necessary condition for an effective mentoring program? The main reason is that the core of the mentoring experience for at-risk youth is stability. Part of the reason many youth

are at-risk in the first place is because of the lack of stability in their lives; many change

residences continually, do not have constant contact with the same adults over a long period of

time, and lack structured routines outside of school hours. All of these risk factors can lead to

various unwanted behaviors and circumstances that mentoring programs try to prevent. In order

to infuse stability into the lives of at-risk youth, it is critical that the mentoring relationships are

steady and constant. In addition, research shows that part of the reason many mentoring

programs are effective is because they demonstrate to the at-risk youth that an adult other than

their parent is willing to show a commitment to their success and well-being. Diane de Anda's

(2001) research indicates that it is specifically the voluntary nature of the mentoring relationship

that impacts the mentee the most: "the voluntary nature of the mentors' participation

demonstrated to the youth a level of concern for their welfare that may not have been assumed

with a parent or helping professional" (114). The mentee begins to see herself and her success as

important because someone else – someone who is under no obligation to her – is dedicated to

her success as well. At the core of effective mentoring, then, is stability and dedication, so

logically it is critical that mentors exhibit a long-term, consistent commitment to the relationship.

Another reason such commitment is necessary is because changes in the attitudes and

behaviors of at-risk youth usually do not occur overnight. Dappen and Isernhagen (2005)

maintain that mentors must have a "clear understanding that significant changes in youth

behavior take time and may not be visible to the mentor for several years" (23). If a mentor only

commits to the relationship for a short period of time, it is unlikely that she will witness any

impact that her presence and support may have on her mentee.

Of course, requiring a "long-term" commitment is rather vague, as is asking for

"consistency." How long must a mentoring relationship last in order to have the greatest positive

impact? How often should mentors and mentees be in contact? Different studies indicate different answers, but the overall consensus is that a mentoring relationship should last at least a year (Rhodes, 2002; de Anda, 2001). Relationships lasting fewer than twelve months have actually been shown to do more harm than good because they add additional instability to the lives of the at-risk youth (Dappen and Isernhagem, 2005). While one year should be the minimum commitment mentoring organizations require, there is not a maximum; the positive impact only increases as the relationship continues because it demonstrates an ever-higher level of dedication to the mentee (Southwick et. al., 2006). My Sister's Circle requires at least a three-year commitment from its mentors at the outset, which to some volunteers is initially a bit intimating. However, the organization has found that after those three years, the mentor-mentee relationship has flourished such that few mentors are not willing to continue volunteering, often until the at-risk girl graduates from the program.

In terms of consistency, the research of Southwick et. al. (2006) demonstrates that mentoring relationships are most effective when the pair experiences in-person contact at least every other month, if not more often. Other forms of contact – such as phone calls, emails, and letters – should occur at least bi-monthly. Again, these are not necessarily hard and fast rules that every mentoring program should follow; rather, these are guidelines indicating what programs and mentoring pairs should strive for in order to have the greatest impact on the lives of at-risk youth.

If research shows how important a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors is to the success of a program, why do many organizations struggle so much to achieve this commitment? As mentioned above, one reason is that many volunteers are intimidated when they are initially asked for such a commitment in light of their various other obligations. Another

reason concerns the fact that, while being a mentor is certainly an uplifting and rewarding experience, it is also extremely challenging. Despite the photos one often sees of mentoring pairs smiling and laughing on organizations' brochures and websites, mentoring often requires involvement in difficult situations and circumstances. In de Anda's (2001) qualitative study, many mentors expressed feelings and symptoms of fatigue and burnout; they felt the experience was emotionally draining as often as or more often than it was invigorating. In addition, the responsibility to keep the mentoring relationship alive lies squarely with the mentor. In their study of the effects of mentoring on at-risk girls, Maldonado et. al. (2008) argue that one key to a successful relationship is "assuming the mentor takes responsibility for keeping the relationship intact even when the mentee exhibits non-responsive periods" (224). Mentors with My Sister's Circle have expressed how difficult this can be: one mentor's mentee was so shy and non-responsive that it was only after a full year of sessions that the pair engaged in their first meaningful, in-depth conversation. Another mentor has experienced extreme emotional fatigue from worrying about and trying to locate her mentee, as the mentee's family changed residences four times in a twelve-month period. Overall, it is often difficult for mentoring organizations to maintain a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors because the job these volunteers are doing can be extremely challenging.

There are, however, several steps that mentoring organizations can take to encourage and support the commitment they require. Organizations should 1) provide significant training both at the beginning and throughout the time that mentors volunteer, 2) ensure that organization staff members are always available for support and trouble-shooting, 3) provide structured opportunities for both one-on-one and group activities, and 4) organize mentor-only events to provide support and express appreciation.

Providing mentors with sufficient training, both when they first begin to volunteer and throughout the course of their time working with the organization, is critical to maintaining a commitment from mentors. Training sessions at the beginning of a volunteer's tenure should focus on clearly defining mentors' roles and responsibilities and articulating the goals and objectives of the program. In addition, mentors should be provided with information on the particular backgrounds, needs, and problems faced by the youth population they will be working with, and given space to discuss and practice relevant communication skills. Mentors need guidance from the very beginning regarding how to respond to sensitive topics and situations their mentees may be experiencing (de Anda, 2001). Also, training should be linked specifically to the objectives of the program; for example, if the mentors will be focusing on encouraging academic achievement, they should be given specific information about the school systems, practices, and procedures that will affect their mentees' academic experience.

In regards to how such training and orientation sessions should be conducted, Dappen and Isernhagen's (2005) research found that "training can be especially effective if it employs role-playing and modeling techniques" so that mentors can become comfortable using the communication skills their mentoring relationship will require (23). In addition, the annual new mentor orientation conducted by My Sister's Circle provides a strong example of what an initial training session should look like. The half-day orientation includes small group discussions exploring mentor expectations and concerns, a general overview of the organization and mentor responsibilities, a moderated panel discussion with current mentors, and ample time for questions and answers. Each new mentor is given an extensive packet of information, including a checklist of mentor duties, a list of one-on-one activity ideas, demographic information of the target population, and summaries of important research studies on the development of teenage girls.

Evaluations of this mentor orientation indicate that new mentors leave feeling secure and prepared for their new role.

It is important that training not only occur at the beginning of a mentor's experience, but also throughout her time working with her mentee. This is necessary for two main reasons. First, the mentoring relationship will continually change as the pair gets to know one another; ongoing training sessions should address the changing role of the mentor as the relationship develops (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). Second, ongoing training in the form of group sessions allows mentors to feel connected to their peer volunteers. It provides a space for sharing successes and challenges, which can lighten the burden many mentors begin to feel and ensure that they remain committed to the organization and the relationship over the long-term.

A second step mentoring organizations can take to help retain their mentors is to ensure that organization staff members are always available for support and trouble-shooting. In de Anda's (2001) study of the RESCUE (Reaching Each Student's Capacity Utilizing Education) mentoring program in California, she explains that agency staff continually provided mentors with support, resources, and relevant information about the situations in their mentees' lives. In interviews with the mentors, many expressed that such staff support was vital to their resolve to continue the mentoring relationship even in the face of challenges, emotional turmoil, and non-responsiveness from mentees. Similarly, Struchen and Porta (1997) argue that staff support for mentors plays a significant role in encouraging mentor retention.

A third strategy for encouraging a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors is to provide both one-on-one and large group activities for participants. While most one-one-one experiences occur outside of time structured by the organization, successful mentoring programs also organize recreational and/or educational events where multiple mentoring pairs can spend

time together. Such group activities are effective for two reasons. First, they keep the mentee involved in the program even when the mentor is unable to be present. Perhaps a mentor is so busy one month with other obligations, or is experiencing personal issues that do not allow her to meet with her mentee for a few weeks; attending the group activity allows the mentee to still spend time with positive role models, and continue to feel involved with the mentoring organization. Second, Struchen and Porta's (1997) research indicates that mentoring programs that focus almost entirely on one-on-one mentoring sessions often leave mentors feeling isolated from their peer volunteers and from the organization itself. Such feelings of seclusion do nothing to bolster the mentor's commitment when the relationship becomes challenging, and can often lead to mentor drop-out. Group activities, however, can mitigate feelings of isolation by allowing both mentors and mentees to see themselves as part of a group effort, and to gain support and encouragement from one another. My Sister's Circle is a good example: the organization coordinates monthly activities – which in the past have included attending local theater productions, bus trips to nearby cities, museum tours, kayaking trips, and arts and crafts workshops – during which all mentors and mentees come together as a large group.

Similarly, mentoring organizations should organize mentor-only events to provide support and express appreciation. Cid Perez-Randall, coordinator of the Linking Lifetimes program in Philadelphia, has said, "It is essential that mentors receive ongoing support, feedback, and recognition to prevent burn-out and sustain interest" (quoted in Kruglik, 1993). Events and activities that allow mentors to socialize, network, and support one another can ensure that they remain consistently committed to the program for the long-term. Organizations should ensure that mentors feel appreciated for giving their time and effort, both through privately expressed gratitude and public recognition. Such events and expressions of appreciation

serve as reminders for mentors of why their service is so important. My Sister's Circle hosts a

yearly mentor social at a local winery, during which mentors are publicly recognized for the

number of years they have been involved in the program. Many mentors have expressed how

important the event is in strengthening their commitment and reinforcing their motivation toward

the goals and objectives of the program.

Overall, research on effective mentoring organizations shows that in order to ensure the

program is having a positive effect on the target population, it is absolutely necessary that the

mentors are required to commit to the mentoring relationships consistently and over the course of

the long-term.

Best Practice #1: Maintaining a High Level of Selectivity of Mentors

Too often when a mentoring program is in its beginning stages, its administrators are so

concerned about recruiting enough volunteers to serve as mentors that almost anyone becomes

eligible. However, as demonstrated above, mentoring can be challenging and demanding, and it

requires people who meet certain criteria and qualifications. In order to ensure that the mentoring

relationships are as effective as possible in helping at-risk youth, organizations should clearly

outline their minimum eligibility standards, and carefully screen potential mentors to make

certain they meet these standards. Organizations should consider a wide range of factors,

including potential mentors' accomplishments and skills, personality traits, attitudes, and ability

to commit to the program.

Why is it so important that mentoring organizations maintain such a high level of

selectivity for mentors? One reason is because mentoring is about more than merely introducing

the presence of an adult into the life of an at-risk youth; it is about providing the youth with a

positive role model, someone whose attitudes and behaviors the youth can emulate. Southwick

et. al. (2006) argue that imitation is one of the most important parts of the mentoring relationship because it can actually transform the youth at the neurological level:

> "Through repetitive imitation of mentor's cognitive strategies and behaviors, specific areas of the brain become activated, new neuronal branches and connections are formed, synaptic transmission increases, and size and shape of the stimulated cortical areas change. If behaviors are imitated for a long enough period of time, these behaviors can become habits. For some theorists, personality is largely a collection of habits" (582).

In other words, the attitudes, behaviors, and even the personalities of at-risk youth can be changed at the most primary levels when they continually imitate their mentors. This is one reason it is so important to be highly selective – to ensure that mentees are imitating the strategies and behaviors of stable, responsible adults.

A second reason selectivity is important is because of the role it plays in the process of matching mentors with mentees. Tierney et. al. (1995) emphasize that mentoring organizations should carefully prescreen mentors in order to be able to more purposefully create mentoring pairs. While there will always be the possibility that a pair simply will not be a good match – and there is sometimes no way to predict this ahead of time – those doing the matches should have a strong sense of the characteristics and personalities of both the mentors and mentees in order to increase the chances of creating successful matches. A careful, extensive screening process allows staff to glean information about the mentor that will be valuable when creating mentor-mentee pairs.

What, then, should mentoring organizations be looking for in potential mentors? A synthesis of the literature indicates that the following nine traits should be considered: no criminal history, solid employment history, availability of time to commit to the program, strong

communication skills, an attitude of care and compassion, an open, accepting mindset, trustworthiness, a high level of self-esteem, and strong listening capabilities.

While it may seem obvious, the first and most important trait for mentors is a lack of criminal history. Safety is an important concern for mentoring organizations because of the one-on-one contact and liability issues that arise. It is recommended that organizations conduct a background check on all mentors (Maldonado et. al., 2008). This is not to say that someone with a criminal history should be barred from volunteering in the nonprofit sector or giving back to the community; however, because most mentoring organizations target at-risk youth in the hopes of getting them *away* from criminal activity – and because working one-on-one with youth involves significant concerns of safety, liability, and accountability – it is not recommended that such persons volunteer as mentors.

Organizations should also check to see if mentors have a solid history of employment. Again, because the goal of many mentoring programs is to help youth become stable and self-sufficient, it is important to make sure that the mentors are as well. Kruglik (1993) writes, "if they [potential mentors] have personal or professional problems, they should be counseled not to become involved as mentors until their own problems are resolved" (19). In an organization such as My Sister's Circle, where the goal is to help the at-risk girls graduate from high school and continue onto college, it is important that mentors be able to model their work ethic and discuss their jobs and career goals. One of the most successful mentor/mentee events MSC organizes each year is its "Take Your Mentee to Work Day," during which mentees are able to experience the work setting. Having a solid employment history ensures that mentors are able to provide these types of experiences for their mentees.

The third trait mentoring organizations should consider is the potential mentor's availability of time to commit to the program and the relationship. In the previous section I argued that it is absolutely necessary that organizations require a long-term, consistent commitment from mentors. Often those doing the screening of potential mentors are impressed by an extensive list of activities and responsibilities; however, these screeners should be wary of potential mentors who already have so many other duties and obligations that they may not be able to fully commit to the mentoring experience. It is worthwhile for staff to be upfront and open about the level of commitment required even in the screening stage because even if a mentor has all other desirable traits and qualities, if she does not have enough time available for the program, the mentoring relationship will not be as successful or effective as it could be.

It is also important for organizations to choose mentors who have strong communication skills. Elaine A. Blechman (1992) has argued that "given the centrality of effective communication to the mentor-protégé relationship, communication skills should be weighted heavily when screening mentors. Prospective mentors should be rigorously screened so that only those individuals who evidence effective communication are selected" (165). Considering how difficult it can be for an at-risk youth to open up to any adult – much less someone totally new – it is vital that mentors have the communication abilities to develop the relationship. As we will see in the next section, this is especially important when working with at-risk *girls* specifically, who value a relationship based on communication more highly.

Mentoring organizations should also screen potential mentors for their overall attitudes towards others. In screening these attitudes, they should look for people who are caring and compassionate, and who have an open, accepting mind-set. Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) explain the importance of a caring, compassionate attitude: "the presence of at least one caring

person – someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child's behavior, the child is doing the best that he or she can given his or her experience – provides support for healthy development and learning" (22). Because the types of youth who are in need of a mentor are often ones who are experiencing very difficult circumstances, it is important that mentors be the types of people who can approach such situations with an attitude of care and compassion. Similarly, mentors should be people who are open-minded and nonjudgmental. Kruglik (1993) writes that mentors should be "capable of showing tolerance of lifestyles different from their own" (19). I would even argue that tolerance is not enough, because the word "tolerance" connotes that one is enduring or "putting up with" difference. Instead, mentors should be genuinely open and accepting of people and lifestyles that differ greatly from their own; they should be the types of people who celebrate difference, who pursue an understanding of diversity. This will be shown to be especially important in the next section, which explores issues of race, class, and gender in regards to the mentoring relationship.

Two other important traits to consider when selecting mentors are trustworthiness and self-esteem. Again, because the idea is that mentees will emulate their mentors, and because mentoring programs hope to increase self-esteem among at-risk youth, it is critical that mentors are able to model a high level of confidence and self-assurance. In addition, the research of Rhodes (2002) indicates that in order to foster resiliency in at-risk youth, it is crucial to build a relationship of trust; he even claims that trust is the fundamental key to the success of any mentoring program. "Without trust, progress on other program goals may be unsuccessful" (23). It is necessary, then, for mentoring organizations to screen potential mentors to ensure that they have high self-esteem and are capable of building a relationship on trust.

The final trait that mentoring organizations should look for in potential mentors relates to their listening skills and abilities. Kruglik (1993) and de Anda (2001) both emphasize how important it is that mentors listen thoughtfully and attentively when their mentees are talking. In the interviews de Anda (2001) conducted with mentees in the Project RESCUE program, many of them expressed satisfaction with their mentoring relationship simply because it gave them someone to whom they could talk and open up. When one mentee was asked what she initially expected from her mentor, she said, "a fun, close, confidential person to talk to" (102). Another said, "someone to talk to about schooling, and life in general" (102). De Anda concludes from her research that, while mentoring organizations are focused on specific, measurable outcomes, from the perspective of the mentees the focus is on the *relationship*, on having "a new friend – someone to talk to" (102). It is important, then, that potential mentors have strong listening skills in order to meet mentee expectations, to be the listening ear so many at-risk youth are looking for.

How, then, should mentoring organizations go about screening for these nine characteristics? Here we can turn to My Sister's Circle as an example. Those interested in becoming an MSC mentor first fill out an initial application, which includes general demographic information and information about employment and education history, and requires the contact information for two references. If the initial application is accepted, mentors then undergo two rounds of interviewing, during which the interviewer can better observe if the person will be a good fit for the program. In addition, MSC student participants are first recruited into the program when they are in fifth grade, even though they are not matched with a one-on-one mentor until they are sixth graders. During their fifth grade year they attend weekly after-

school group sessions run by the program staff. During these sessions staff get to know the girls better, which enables them to make more purposeful mentor-mentee matches.

Obviously MSC's interview process involves a significant amount of subjective judgment on the part of the interviewer. This is simply the nature of the situation; there is no conclusive, objective way to measure traits such as compassion or trust, so the interviewer must do the best she can to gauge the potential mentor's attitudes and characteristics based on the interviews. An organization could, however, utilize standardized tests and surveys to judge some of the other important traits, such as tolerance/open-mindedness, self-esteem, and listening skills. While there is no definitive, perfect way to screen potential mentors, in order to be as effective as possible it is important that mentoring organizations carefully consider how they will recruit and select mentors according to the nine standards outlined here. By maintaining high standards and a high level of selectivity, organizations can be more certain that they are matching mentees with those most qualified and capable of modeling positive attitudes and behaviors and fostering close, caring relationships.

Best Practice #2: Considering Mentees' Specific Identities and Needs

Mentoring organizations need to be wary of making blanket, universal assumptions about the at-risk youth they are serving. It is important that organizations consider the individual differences of mentees – their specific identities based on factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. This is significant because different populations can experience dramatically different risk factors, meaning they have different needs that the mentoring relationship should try to meet.

The fact that different populations have different risk factors is especially relevant in relation to gender. Girls experience unique, gender-specific risk factors that are often ignored

when the needs of at-risk youth are analyzed without a gendered lens. Zahn et. al.'s (2008)

research found that certain factors – such as family dynamics, school involvement, and

neighborhood environment – equally increase the risk of delinquency for both boys and girls;

other factors, however, affect a girl's risk much more significantly. For example, girls can

experience early puberty, and the subsequent "disparity between biological and social maturity

can lead to increased conflict or negative associations with older boys or men" (4). Zahn also

points out that girls experience much higher levels of sexual victimization, abuse, and

maltreatment than boys, which in turn increases their risk of delinquency. Adolescent girls also

deal with issues of depression and anxiety much more so than boys do, putting them at risk for

low self-esteem, low academic achievement, addictive disorders, and even suicide (Zahn et. al.,

2008). Finally, girls face the gender-specific risk of unwanted teenage pregnancy. It is clear that

gender greatly affects the types of risk factors an at-risk youth experiences, so mentoring

organizations should not neglect to consider these factors when designing their intervention

programs.

It is worthwhile to note that individual identities – and the risk factors and sources of

oppression associated with them – are not mutually exclusive. For example, a low-income,

African-American girl living in a drug-infested neighborhood cannot separate her identity or

disconnect her self-understanding into neat, clear-cut categories of class, race, gender, and

environment. All of these identity markers overlap within her, constantly interacting and

affecting one another in ways that make her individual and unique. This proposes a challenge for

mentoring organizations, in that they cannot simply consider one identity factor, such as gender,

while ignoring all others. At the same time, however, no program could ever successfully cater to

every specific need of each individual mentee. Mentoring programs must do their best to find a

balance between creating a general program that serves the needs of many youth, while still recognizing that such youth have individual identities and needs that must be acknowledged not as separate or detached, but as interdependent and overlapping.

How, then, can mentoring organizations address the individual identities of their mentees? What concrete steps should they take to acknowledge the specific needs of their target population? I outline three strategies: considering differences in the context of making mentor-mentee matches, training mentors about difference, and consulting the target population when designing the program.

First, mentoring organizations should consider the specific identities and needs of their mentees in the context of making matches. The first factor to consider is gender. Fullwood (2001) writes, "to date, most conventional and new models of youth programs continue to use 'universal' programming, which does not distinguish between the needs and strengths of girls and boys. To be fully effective, the design and operation of a program must consider gender" (5-6). The research on same-gender versus cross-gender matches is, at this point, inconclusive. DuBois, Holloway, et. al. (2002) argue that whether the mentor-mentee relationship is same or cross-gender is unrelated to program effectiveness. Sosik and Godshalk (2000), however, found that female-female mentoring relationships "offer a greater level of friendship, counseling, personal support, and sponsorship than other gender combinations" (770).

Even though there is no consensus in the literature, I argue that there is enough research on the success of same-gender relationships to merit mentoring organization pairing at-risk girls specifically and exclusively with female mentors – especially in light of the gender-specific risk factors girls experience, as discussed above. Darling, Bogat, et. al. (2006) make a strong case that because the social identities of boys and girls are different, their experiences with mentoring

are also different. They argue that personal relationships play more of a central role in the lives of adolescent girls, and that their relationships are more likely to be characterized by emotional closeness (767). These differences have important implications for mentoring programs. First, they imply that girls and boys need different types of mentoring relationships: "because of the high value that adolescent girls place on intimacy and connection, a close, warm mentoring relationship may be better received and more helpful" (767). Second, Rhodes (2002) has argued that "meaningful conversation" plays a key role in the success of a mentoring relationship for girls specifically, who are often more verbally based than boys. In other words, "girls want mentors who talk to them, whereas boys want mentors who engage in activities with them" (Darling, Bogat, et. al., 2006, 771). To give at-risk girls and boys what they specifically need, mentoring organizations should focus on making same-gender matches.

Additionally, the research of Davis-Maye and Perry (2007) indicates that having the support of a maternal figure specifically is significant in the development of hope in at-risk African American girls. While having male support and role models is also important, these researchers found that having a female role model is a key prevention strategy for girls. "Often the 'other mothers' may fulfill the roles of nurturer, emotional supporter, and motivator" (323). Such research again supports mentoring organizations matching at-risk girls exclusively with female mentors. It should be noted, however, that the job of a mentor is not to take the place of the mentee's biological mother, female peers, or any other important female-female relationship the mentee has. Rather, the mentor should see her role as multi-dimensional and fluid. In an interview in de Anda's (2001) qualitative analysis, one mentor commented, "at times I have to be her [the mentee's] friend; at times I have to be her mother; at times I have to be her big sister. Whatever it is, I want her to be able to look at me as someone that cares about her as a person

and cares about where she's going and what she plans on doing with herself" (109). Overall, even though there is no conclusive consensus in the literature, I believe there is enough evidence on the benefits of female-female mentoring relationships that, when considering gender, organizations should focus solely on same-gender matches.

Interestingly, the same logic does not necessarily hold true in relation to race and ethnicity. Several studies show that cross-racial matches are just as successful as same-race ones (Blechman, 1992; Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). This does not mean, however, that race should go unacknowledged, or that it has no effect on the mentoring relationship. In fact, studies show that the key to fostering successful cross-racial mentoring matches is being open and upfront about issues of race from the very beginning; rather than treating race as something secretive or shameful that is best left unmentioned, mentoring programs offer a unique opportunity to start a dialogue (Darling, Bogat, et. al., 2006). The key is recognizing and acknowledging the role that race and prejudice have played in our society. "U.S. culture, which has a legacy of discrimination against, and prejudice toward, persons of color, provides an important context for mentoring relationships" (768). This legacy of discrimination means that there is often a certain level of distrust in cross-racial relationships, especially in the early stages "when group stereotypes are more prevalent" (768). But rather than shy away from such distrust, or try to prevent it completely, mentoring programs should view the discomfort or unease as a site of growth, as a chance to bring the mentoring pair closer, by being open about issues of race from the very beginning. Because research shows that cross-racial mentoring relationships are effective, mentoring organizations should feel confident making cross-racial matches, while simultaneously not being timid about discussing the ways that race can affect the relationship.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to note that while I have commented on the existing research on gender, race, and mentoring, there is a significant need for more research to be conducted in this area. In addition, there is little to no existing research examining the role that differences in class and sexuality play in mentoring relationships. Despite this lack of research, I argue that all of the many factors of difference – including class and sexuality – should be considered by mentoring organizations as much as possible. However, sound evidence on the implications for mentoring based on these factors is not yet available.

The second way that mentoring organizations can address the individual identities and needs of their mentees is by training their mentors on issues of difference and diversity. In order to feel comfortable being open about issues of gender, race, etc., it is imperative that mentors have an understanding of the history surrounding these issues and the role they play in our culture. It would be difficult for mentors to recognize and/or be sensitive to issues of difference within their mentoring relationship without some kind of foundational knowledge of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism. Mentors should be open to learning about these concepts if they have been properly screened for the traits of acceptance and open-mindedness, as discussed in a previous section. One way that mentoring organizations could provide such training is to invite experts from local colleges and universities to training/orientation events to make presentations on the history and current relevance of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism.

Darling, Bogat, et. al. (2006) provide an example of how having a knowledge and understanding of difference can positively affect the mentoring relationship. They point out that different cultures often have different values; for example, some cultures value collectivism – a worldview that values the needs and perspectives of the group over those of the individual – while others value individualism – a view which elevates the interests of the individual.

Collectivism "is relatively more common among Asian, Latino, and African American than among European American youth in the United States" (768). When a mentoring program and/or an individual mentor recognizes this difference in values and worldview, steps can be taken to ensure that the difference is respected. For example, My Sister's Circle organizes monthly group activities which allow the mentee to identify as a part of the larger project, and enables her to interact with responsible adults besides just her immediate mentor. In addition, the staff members of My Sister's Circle work with each mentees' parents to ensure that they are included in the prevention efforts – setting up meetings between the parents and the mentor, working with the parents on high school and college applications, etc. In this way, the mentoring program becomes a collective effort, one that seeks to acknowledge and respect the specific identities and needs of the mentees.

The final way that mentoring organizations can address the individual differences of their mentees is by consulting the target population when designing the program. This involves a significant amount of openness – and some research – on the part of the organization administrators before the program even begins. When considering issues of difference, one of the biggest mistakes that those in positions of power and privilege, or those with the abilities and means to provide help, make is to assume that they know what is best for the people they want to assist. Because they assume this, they often do not bother to consult members of the actual target population, who may have very different perspectives on what the problem is and how it can be solved. In order to create a program that is most effective at addressing the needs of the specific at-risk youth an organization is targeting, those at-risk youth – and their families, teachers, and others within their immediate environment – should be consulted. The organization could conduct surveys and interviews, research current data on the target population, and examine

other projects and programs aimed at similar populations. This will give the organization a more comprehensive understanding of how best to address the unique needs of its future mentees.

Overall, in order to be as effective as possible, it is important that mentoring organizations not make universal assumptions about the youth they are serving. Rather, they should carefully consider individual differences and the specific identities and needs of their mentees, based on factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. Doing so will help the mentoring program provide intervention efforts geared specifically toward the unique target population it is serving.

Best Practice #3: Addressing Both the Behavioral and Structural Forces Affecting Mentees

As discussed in defining the concept of "at-risk," at-risk youth are affected by many different kinds of factors, including both behavioral and structural ones. Behavioral forces are those that are personal and individual, such as the youth's self-esteem, attitudes, and conduct. Mentoring programs address these forces by supporting and encouraging the youth to make positive choices. Structural forces, on the other hand, are those that, to a large extent, are outside of the youth's control; they are environmental factors and societal oppressions based on sexism, racism, classism, etc. For example, an at-risk girl cannot help it if her school system is under-performing because it is under-funded. Changing her individual behavior will not change the school system as a whole, at least not directly or immediately, but that school system will still be a significant influence in her life.

Bulger and Watson (2006) advocate for a comprehensive definition of the at-risk student that extends "beyond background characteristics" to include both "internal characteristics and environmental factors" (25). While their work deals specifically with college students, I argue that their logic applies equally to mentoring organizations. In order to incite change on a deeper

level, mentoring organizations should not solely or exclusively address the behavioral forces

affecting mentees; they must also address the structural factors that have helped to create

mentees' at-risk situation in the first place. Programs can address both of these forces by seeing

their mission as a two-fold one of providing direct, individual services to mentees while

simultaneously working to foster social change.

Kravetz (2004) discusses this issue at length in her book *Tales from the Trenches:*
Politics and Practice in Feminist Service Organizations. In examining five feminist service

organizations, she notes that in each one "members maintained social change and service

delivery as interconnected missions" (117). Kravetz explains that when organizations provide

services without also addressing structural concerns, they are essentially giving immediate relief

to a select few without tackling the issue of *why* the problem exists in the first place, and without

inciting broader change that could help those beyond the organization's immediate reach. One

organization member she interviewed commented, "no matter which way you look at it, it's

[providing direct services] a band-aid. We need band-aids for people who are suffering…But I'm

tremendously frustrated, because I want social change. We are trying to provide the women with

the tools to help them survive when they get out of the program…But, we send them back out

into a society that does not support them" (133). In other words, it is not enough for mentoring

organizations to provide direct services to their mentees; they should also be working to foster

social change on a structural level in order to address the forces that affect the mentees more

comprehensively.

What is social change, and how can mentoring organizations incorporate it into their

programming? Fullwood (2001) defines social change as "changes in attitudes and thinking that

result in changes in the behaviors and practices of individuals and systems." It requires "a shift in

the status quo, eliminating the unquestioning acceptance of the way things are, leading to an understanding of how to make positive social change happen" (19). I outline three basic ways that mentoring organizations can engage in social change efforts: through providing community education, advocating for political change, and by encouraging mentees to become proponents of social change themselves.

Because they work so closely with at-risk youth, mentoring organizations are in a unique position to provide insight into *why* these youth are at-risk in the first place. In order to create deeper change, then, organizations should engage in community education efforts to teach others about what needs to be changed in society and why. Organizations should envision what society would need to look like in order for their work to become obsolete (because youth are so stable and supported that they do not need mentoring intervention efforts). While such a society is more of an ideal vision than a reality that will ever be reached, mentoring programs should make it a goal to teach society at large about how it can help remedy the factors that cause youth to be at-risk.

Second, mentoring organizations should actively advocate for political change. Many of the structural forces affecting at-risk youth can only be addressed at a public, institutional level. Organizations should see themselves as political activists who can incite widespread change on issues affecting their target population. For example, an organization can help the at-risk girl who is struggling because her school is under-funded – and the many other at-risk youth affected by this issue – by supporting changes in tax and budgetary policies that create under-performing school systems in the first place. While some mentoring organizations are wary of engaging in overt political action, doing do is an important way of addressing both the behavioral and the structural forces that affect their mentees.

Finally, mentoring organizations can incite social change by encouraging mentees to become proponents of social change themselves. Fullwood (2001) argues, "the effective girl-focused programs build leadership skills, strengthen girls' willingness and capacity to take action on issues that matter to them, and help them develop into strong, healthy women and agents of social change in their communities" (3). In other words, by providing opportunities for at-risk girls to engage in social change events and projects, mentoring organizations can essentially provide direct services and foster social change through a single program or activity. There are several concrete ways this could be accomplished, such as by providing the mentees with leadership training, creating opportunities for them to engage in community-service activities, and encouraging them to think critically about the issues that affect their lives. In this way, mentoring organizations can stimulate change in an individual mentee while simultaneously working toward deeper, more long-term changes in society.

Overall, we see that when a mentoring organization focuses exclusively on providing direct services to individual mentees, it succeeds at providing immediate aid for those individuals but fails at addressing the underlying structural forces that help to create the circumstances that place youth at-risk in the first place. To be effective and make a difference at a deeper level, mentoring organizations should see their missions as two-fold, involving both the provision of direct services and the fostering of more widespread social change.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

In this research paper, I have outlined the necessary conditions and best practices that mentoring organizations should utilize in order to be as effective as possible. It is essential that organizations have clearly defined objectives and outcomes, and that they require a long-term, consistent commitment from their mentors. The highest quality mentoring programs also

maintain a high level of selectivity of mentors, carefully consider the specific identities and needs of their mentees, and address both the behavioral and structural forces affecting their target population.

Analyzing and outlining these necessary conditions and best practices is important for our overall understanding of prevention and intervention strategies for at-risk youth. Just because a strategy seems logical and useful does not automatically guarantee that it will have the positive impact we assume it will. Moreover, my research shows that a strategy like mentoring cannot simply be labeled "effective" or "ineffective"; rather, the effectiveness of mentoring is based on a complex interplay of many factors. To ensure that we are doing the most we can to have a positive impact on the lives of at-risk youth, we must continue to examine and utilize the conditions and practices that make mentoring as successful as possible.

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