MENTOR
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Research Corner: *Work based Mentoring*

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The bottom line on work-based mentoring

Informal and formal mentors have been heralded as among the key ingredients in shaping the academic and career development of youth. Recognizing this important role, schools and businesses have launched a growing array of work-based (or workplace-based) mentoring programs. This emphasis is also reflected in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, which requires work-based mentors for all students involved in work-based learning. Work-based mentoring typically takes place in the offices of the sponsoring company-as distinguished from company-wide initiatives in which employees are encouraged to mentor young people off-site during company time (e.g., The New York City Mentoring Program). Work-based programs are specifically designed to provide low-income students with job skills training, exposure to the world of work and access to labor market opportunities.

As many employees will attest, a work-based mentoring relationship can transform a young life, becoming the means by which an adolescent connects with others, with teachers and schools, with their future prospects and potential partners. Indeed, in their study of disadvantaged youth who were "beating the odds," (i.e., successfully attending Columbia University), Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer found that the most important factor was:

> "..the intervention by one person at a critical point in the life of each student. Sometimes the mentor was a loving relative; other times it was someone paid to offer expert advice. In either case, it was the human contact that made the difference" (p. 65).[1]

That critical point for many of our nation's youth is high school-and the transition through it and into early adulthood can determine future economic opportunities and life satisfaction. Fortunately, work-based mentoring programs appear to provide guidance to a growing number of students as they make this transition. In this column, I will discuss work-based mentoring, including the rationale for it and research on its effectiveness.

The troubled path to adulthood

Many young adults lack the guidance, preparation and resources to succeed in skilled labor and higher education-problems that are particularly acute among low-income and minority youth. Over 15% of American youth fail to complete high school,[2] and, even among the graduates, only about half ever attend a two- or four-year college.

Youth with limited formal schooling face substantial barriers to employment. They are often ill-equipped to take on available jobs, which require increasingly high levels of education and skills.

As a result, many of our nation's youth are languishing during their early adult years-filling their time with low-paying "dead-end" jobs or not working at all. Indeed, an estimated five million American youth aged 16 to 24 are both out of school and unemployed.[3]

Strategies that forge links between high-school and higher education/vocations, can help youth attain satisfying jobs and lives:

- Caring adults represent a key component of any such efforts to help adolescents succeed in the transition to adulthood; and
- Work-based mentors can help high school students acquire the skills, knowledge and work habits that they need to succeed.

Do work-based mentoring programs work?

Most research and evaluation on work-based mentoring has focused on adult career development. In general, this research has shown consistent associations between mentor support and career advancement.[4] As Simonetti (1999) humorously observed: "Without mentors, breaking through the glass ceiling can be "paneful."[5]

- Although relatively scarce, the research on youth work-place mentoring programs is also quite promising. Students involved in well-organized, work-based and apprenticeship programs have shown psychosocial, professional and educational gains.[6] Research also suggests that work-place mentoring and apprenticeship can increase youth’s optimism about their occupational future and lower their levels of aggression and delinquency.[7]
- Linehman for example, evaluated a work-based, adult-youth mentoring program established by the Philadelphia school district. Participating in the program for more than half of the academic year was positively associated with students’ grade point average, attendance rates, self-esteem and the feeling that school was relevant to work.[8]
- Importantly, mentors also benefit from the relationships. Mentoring expert Susan Weinberger completed a survey at Allstate Insurance company and found that 75 percent of employees who mentored elementary school children reported that the activity improved their [the adults’] attitude at work.[9]

Indeed, Hamilton[10] delineated several mentor/corporate benefits, including:

- Training future workers;
- Getting help from mentees
- Feeling good about doing something for the community; and
- Developing skills that mentors can use when supervising others at work

How does work-based mentoring benefit youth?

A review of the literature suggests several pathways by which work-based programs might smooth the transition to adulthood. Work based mentors appear to help youth by:

- Imparting crucial skills (both job-related and personal);
- Enriching and expanding the youth's social connections; and
- Enhancing mentees' self concept and optimism about the future.

Of course, a necessary condition for an effective work-based relationship is that the two people involved (mentor and mentee) feel connected-that there is mutual trust and a sense that one is understood, liked and respected. When such a connection is formed, the mentor becomes a more powerful instrument for positive change, often serving as a role model who exemplifies the sorts of knowledge, skills and behavior that adolescents hope to someday acquire.

Skills enhancement

Work-based mentors impart both the job-specific skills and the social and personal skills needed to succeed in the workplace.[11] Interestingly, although job skills are often emphasized, employers tend to be more concerned with the latter set of skills. These include such qualities as:

- Diligence;
- Teamwork;
- An appreciation for rules and norms of settings;
- Willingness to take responsibility;
- Good written and verbal communication skills; and
- Active listening.

Social networking and advocacy

Given their disadvantages, the relatives and acquaintances of many low-income youth are typically less aware of pertinent resources and are not in the position to link youth with potential employers or opportunities. Work-place mentors can open doors to new opportunities and help their mentees establish and make use of connections, services and opportunities in the community. Along these lines, work-based mentors can also play an instrumental role in:

- Recommending youth to potential employers;
- Expanding the number and types of work-related people the youth meets;
- Helping youth become part of more socially desirable or higher-achieving peer groups (e.g., students in an college-prep classes, athletes); and
- Helping youth to resist negative influences.[12]

This sort of advocacy is depicted in Jon Katz's excellent book Geeks[13], in which he chronicles the ascension of two somewhat adrift youth (Jesse and Eric) into computer jobs and college careers. Although none of Jesse's relatives or friends had gone to college, and his family had been torn apart by difficulties, Katz encouraged him to pursue an education and successfully shepherded him through the University of Chicago's application process.

Enhanced self concept

Through new skills and social connections, mentees gain a sense of mastery and confidence- and an enhanced sense of self and how they perceive their social roles.

- Adolescents’ views of themselves can come to partially a "reflected appraisal" of their mentors’ judgments of them. If the mentor views a youth positively, the youth’s view of him or herself can gradually shift and can even start to change the way she thinks parents, peers, teachers, and others view her.
- A mentor’s positive appraisal of a youth can gradually become incorporated into the youth’s stable sense of self.[14]

Exemplary work-based programs

Cornell Youth Apprenticeship Demonstration Project

This program emphasizes opportunities for youth to learn at work. The program begins in students’ junior year of high school and involves workplace teaching, advising and mentoring. Students are provided with course credit and formal certification on completion.

- The demonstration project involved 100 students who were attending several high schools in the Binghamton, N.Y., metropolitan area. The students were employed 10 to 20 hours a week in a range of jobs (i.e., health care, administration and office technology, or manufacturing and engineering technology). The project, which involved managers and coordinators from eleven firms, incorporated aspects of successful German apprenticeship programs, which the Hamiltons have extensively observed. The project was guided, in part, by advice from leaders of organized labor and representatives of the New York State Department of Labor.
- After four years of testing approaches in the project, a guidebook, Learning Well at Work: Choices for Quality (printed and distributed free by the National School-to-Work Opportunities Office, 1997) was developed. The guidebook is designed to help others develop and evaluate work-based learning programs for high school students.

Participation in the program has been associated with improved academic and vocational outcomes (see Web site).

New York City Mentoring Program

The New York City Mentoring Program matches groups of at least 15 or more employee-volunteers from an organization with students at a specific high school. Through the program, employees serve as one-to-one mentors to public high school students. Since 1983, The New York City Mentoring Program has trained thousands of mentor volunteers and provided technical assistance to many businesses, organizations and government agencies in how to provide mentoring. Currently, the program has 64 mentoring efforts operating and has 60 partner organizations providing the volunteers. The program serves over 1,500 students citywide in 51 high schools.

How it works

- A coordinator at designated schools facilitates operation of the program--identifying student participants, attaining parental permission and monitoring the mentor/mentee relationships. The coordinator also works with liaisons at partner organizations to pair the mentors and mentees, plan the program kickoff and organize joint activities and events throughout the school year.

- Once screened and matched, the mentors are expected to commit to meeting with their students one hour a week or two hours bi-weekly. Usually, students meet with their mentors after school at the mentors' workplace. To ensure consistency and continuity, mentors are also asked to make a year-long commitment to the program and to participate in an evaluation process. Mentor/mentee activities are determined by the specific type of mentoring effort the mentor's organization has chosen.
- Mentors expose students to the world of work and to the specific jobs. In addition, they often provide academic advice and expose their mentees to New York City's cultural and social resources. Field trips and special events are aimed at enlarging students' sense of the world. Companies or organizations are encouraged to be flexible in allowing their employees to participate in such activities. Institutions are also asked to designate an in-house liaison to work with the mentors, the school and the Board of Education's Office of Business and Community Relations, as well as to provide space for mentoring program functions or events. Preliminary evaluations of the New York City Mentoring Program suggest that student participants benefit in terms of both career and academic outcomes.

The Governor's Committee's Mentoring Program

- The Governor's Committee's Mentoring Program works in collaboration with the New York City Mentoring Program, the New York City Board of Education and the Mentoring Partnership of New York to identify students from low-income families and match them with corporate mentors. The matches are based on the students' skills and interests.
- Mentors expose their student mentees to the world of work and help them make the connection between staying in school, pursuing higher education and gaining meaningful employment. The program currently serves 250 at-risk public high school students in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens.

During weekly sessions at the mentors' work sites, students:

- Learn about the world of work;
- Get advice about staying in school, and
- Get help in seeking a job or preparing for college.
- Based on student profiles and mentor questionnaires, matches are made. At the end of each semester, four faculty advisers at each school help student participants integrate their mentoring experiences into their life planning. Paid summer jobs, sponsored by New York City, allow students to apply what they have learned to "real-life situations". The program has shown strong and promising indicators of success (e.g., student participants are more apt to graduate from high school and attend college). . The program currently is preparing to undergo an extensive evaluation.

Conclusions

- Given their benefits, work-based mentoring efforts are important strategies for helping high school students make a smooth transition to adulthood. Despite the many benefits, however, work-based learning programs are available to only a small fraction of the youth who could benefit.
- A major challenge, therefore, will be to increase the number of mentoring opportunities available for those who need them most. Beyond isolated programs, employers must

make a deeper commitment to mentoring-appreciating the fact that all young employees are potential mentees.[15]

- Work-based mentoring, internships and apprenticeships, combined with increased informal mentoring at work and the expansion of paid jobs for young people will result in greater opportunities for youth and help them enjoy a more fulfilling adulthood.

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