

MENTORING RESEARCH AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT  
Developing Culturally Sensitive Tools for Mentoring in Educational Settings

Carlene N. Folau

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JaNaë Lilly  
Service-Learning Coordinator  
Bennion Center  
University of Utah

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David Kinikini  
Community Partner  
Orientation and Transitions Coordinator  
Center for Ethnic Student Affairs

Joel Arvizo  
Faculty Advisor  
Family and Consumer Studies  
University of Utah

Kehaulani Folau  
Student Member  
Pacific Islander Student Association  
University of Utah

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## **ABSTRACT**

Racial disparities in education affect ongoing cycles of poverty and reproduction of the working class among communities of color. Understanding mentors take on a vital role that needs to account for these relevant issues in order to be effective in mentoring objectives including academic support and career exploration. Research and program development is undertaken with little consideration to mutual benefit in same-race mentoring relationships. The integrative service project considers these factors in developing a mentoring tool for future efforts in ethnic-specific mentoring for greater educational access.

## **BACKGROUND**

Racial disparities in education affect ongoing cycles of poverty and reproduction of the working class among communities of color. Disparities include a structural separation between generations of immigrant and other ethnic families, opportunity gaps based on race and socioeconomic status, and a mentoring gap where millions of youth are denied mentors within educational systems. Youth of color have unique needs influenced directly and indirectly by cultural traditions and systemic issues connected to race. Understanding mentors take on a vital role that needs to account for these relevant issues in order to be effective in mentoring objectives. Growing and evolving populations of mentees and mentors reciprocate benefit as disparities and barriers are alleviated. As mentoring research contributes to program development, it is important to recognize ethnic relevancy as appropriate for program design, operations, and management.

In 2007, a mentoring effort called the Education First Mentoring Program was piloted to assist Pacific Islanders of a Salt Lake City high school with academic goals and interests. The program aimed to improve the discouraging statistics related to test scores, dropout rates, and levels of educational attainment for racial and ethnic minorities, particularly those of Pacific Islander descent. The effort began as an integrative service project and was established as a student-directed program for two academic years. Replication of existing resources, a limited number of corresponding volunteers and stakeholders, and an absence of formal policies impaired the program efforts. As a participant in the original integrative service project, current program director, and Pacific Islander woman, I feel culturally sensitive mentoring is still a solution in bridging gaps if appropriate action-research and tools are administered.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Growing evidence indicates the impact on mentee experiences and benefits varies depending on gender, and these findings may have significance to differing ages and ethnic backgrounds (MENTOR, 2010). Research focuses surround development and evaluation of approaches adapted to youth from varying demographics and a majority of studies show youth gravitate to mentors of the same sex and the same race (MENTOR, 2010). These studies also emphasize the role of other factors in determining the success of mentoring relationships (Rinehart & Blum). These factors include whether the mentee perceives the mentor as similar in other ways and whether mentors and programs are culturally sensitive (Liang & West, 2007).

Traditional mentoring establishes mentoring relationships, with a one-on-one ratio between mentor and mentee, demonstrates evidence in reducing the incidence of delinquency, substance use, and academic failure (MENTOR, How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice, 2005). Formal youth mentoring programs can promote positive outcomes including improved self esteem, developed social skills, and career development (Garringer, Fulop, & Rennick, 2003). Mentoring programs have limited resources, a limited volunteer base, and a growing number of mentees and in response are using alternatives to traditional mentoring including group, team, peer, and online mentoring approaches (MENTOR, How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice, 2005). Mentoring research for individual programs, statewide programs, and national partnerships measure costs and benefits while translating findings into useful tactics for program development.

Along with existing EFMP tools and manuals, ethnic-specific references, local and internal, will be used to construct materials that will aid cultural brokers. “Tongan parents’ push

for education is often undermined by their children's 'other world' in the U.S., dominated by low income neighborhoods, school peers who have no vision of higher education (and are often anti-education), and by schools that do not know how to relate to their Tongan-born parents (and vice versa)" (Small & Tupouniua, 2007). Facilitating youth participation and engaging individual strengths, developmental stages, and needs is also important (Senbel, 2007).

## **PROCEDURE**

After examining the efficacy of previous efforts and gathering input, goals for the program were set. These goals included increased community partnerships, improved services to mentors and youth, increased parent involvement, improved outcomes for youth, and more efficient means of evaluation. The first action step is to conduct a community needs assessment and review youth mentoring and development literature. Second, identification of participants is needed including sources for mentee and mentor recruitment. Third, formal and informal partnerships with other community organizations are established. Fourth, necessary training materials to ensure mentors have necessary skills are prepared. Fifth, an advisory council or steering committee is formed. Last, mentoring tools including a policy and procedure manual are composed to offer support to future mentoring efforts.

## **RESULTS**

### *Needs Assessment*

Qualitative methods within an action research methodology are utilized as part of this project to account for the role of race and ethnicity in mentoring programs and educational advocacy. Qualitative methods include interviews, surveys, as well as a collection of literature and community-based narratives. Surveys of Pacific Islanders in high school and university settings are assessed. Interviews assess needs and opportunities among students, families, and

communities. A collection of literature from national mentoring organizations and partnerships accompanied by collected narratives and community-based reflections from over two years of program development also influence the conclusions that will impact further program development.

### *Participant Identification and Establishing Partnerships*

The program has been established as a program in the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center from the fall of 2007. As the program struggles to maintain committed participants, the restructuring will need networking. Identifying participants includes naming resources for mentee recruitment as well as mentor recruitment. Because the program originally worked with East High School, the option is still open however because the school has access to university resources already because of close proximity, another school is preferred. After speaking with University Neighborhood Partners, it is possible to work with west side communities by going through West High School resources. Although a specific contact was difficult to find, the University Neighborhood Partners are cooperative in networking and building resources. A representation from the Center of Ethnic Student Affairs has allowed itself to take part in mentor recruitment, providing a site, as well as offering resources for mentor recruitment including resources at West High School. The athletics department is another source for mentor recruitment.

### *Training Procedures*

After meeting with an academic consultant from University Neighborhood Partners, she has offered her knowledge and skills to future program efforts by providing training to mentors. The integrative service project will provide additional tools for college preparation including calendars and paperwork relevant to processing mentors. Orientation, screening, and application

are other processes the integrative service project will define before training takes place. Training and training materials will be an essential part of establishing grounds for success in mentoring relationships.

### *Forming Committee*

Because a portion of students have discontinued their coursework at the University of Utah, it is necessary to work with other students. This fact emphasizes the need for retention in institutions of higher education as well as recruitment. A staff member each from the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center as well as University Neighborhood Partners has been recruited to help develop mentoring efforts. A Pacific Islander student, as well as a professor from the department of Family and Consumer Studies has been recruited as well. The knowledge of consumer and community studies as well as human development and family studies will offer a great deal of support to the content of the mentoring program and materials developed.

### *Developing Tools*

Developing tools includes defining procedures for mentors and mentees. Procedures before matching include orientation, application, screening, and training for mentors as well as orientation for mentees. Policies and procedures must be redefined from past materials as well as collaboration of other mentoring program materials. Matching is a process to be defined. Once matching is completed, matches must be monitored and evaluated. Aside from these program management items, actual operations of the program are defined in this integrative service project. College preparation calendars, cultural events and issues, as well as flexibility are factored into monthly activity planners. The tools will be left with University Neighborhood Partners to collaborate with community partners and has been shared with growing mentoring efforts in educational access.

## REFLECTION

While most mentors are white, the majority of the corresponding mentee population is from communities of color. Much of the debate and research around same-race mentoring is without consideration of reciprocity among mentee-mentor relationships. Often cross-race relationships negatively impact mentees by negating structural inequity and continuation of structural racism continues to foster disparities.

Mentors who carry the capacity for cultural humility and who respect individual-family values and worldviews are vital to effective communication and connection. Response to racial identity and cultural values greatly impacts relationships. Often cross-race relationships negatively impact mentees by negating structural inequity. On the other hand, same-race mentors with appropriate familial involvement bridge cultural and opportunity gaps by sharing experiences.

There are relationships of power, perceived and actual barriers, as well as several resources within education. These systems along with structural racism require navigation. Mentors who understand the complexities of access for communities of color enable relatable relationships and sustainability in access through continued communication. The aspects of ethnically and culturally rich environments including schools and neighborhoods develop the need for these cultural brokers that communicate with youth and families. In turn, mentors of color are able to reconnect cultural losses through families with cultural ties. They eliminate traces of internalized discrimination as they befriend young counterparts and influence their abilities to correct societal disparities while strengthening their own.

The role of race and ethnicity in mentoring needs to be further evaluate in respect to mentor benefit as well as mentee experience. There are advantages to both groups including

cultural awareness and sensitivity, alleviating disparities through recruiting mentors of color, and providing relatable navigation of resources. Recruitment and commitment of mentors of color can potentially close the mentoring gap and enable same-race matches especially needed among young males of color. There is great reliance on program design and planning as well as management, operations, and evaluation to foster these values and goals. Mutual engagement and empowerment as well as ability to relate to one another can strengthen functions in educational access. Without imposing goals, mentoring relationships need to allow goal setting, self reflection, and exploration, as well as mutual benefit and development.

The limited amount of mentors from communities of color is discouraging considering the amount of corresponding mentees from these communities. With a limited volunteer base, it is difficult to sustain same-race pairs. A former mentee expresses her appreciation in having a same-sex, same-race mentor that was able “to relate” and support her in ways her friends, family, and school personnel could not. During this year, the mentee and mentor together were able to find resources to higher education and career development before each graduated.

Repetition in mentoring efforts is a major concern for the Salt Lake community as well as other localities. While there are several mentoring efforts that emphasize the importance of racial and educational issues in regard to access, few are ethnic-specific. During the first two years of operation, students would receive assistance with test preparation from the volunteers in the school-based mentoring program. Along with several mentoring efforts, there are often multiple resources from local schools, communities, and families available to assist youth. These resources are provided openly and eliminate the need for mentoring programs to recreate or duplicate efforts like in the test preparation example.

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