



**DEVELOPING A MENTORING PROGRAM WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS:  
A FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR WORKING WITH REFUGEE YOUTH**  
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Mentoring is defined as “the formation of a helping relationship between a younger person (the mentee) and an unrelated, relatively older, more experienced person (the mentor) designed to increase the capacity of the young person to connect with positive social and economic networks” (Department for Victorian Communities 2005, cited in Griffiths, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2009, p. 33). Mentoring programs, as experiential learning methods for college students, can be one way for university students to better realize the larger context and purpose behind providing service for marginalized communities (Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009, p.69). As an experiential learning method, mentoring can both inform college students of the challenges faced by underserved populations in their communities, as well as help college students feel more connected on campus and with surrounding communities. College students who participated in a mentoring and service learning study arranged by researchers at the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning reported that understanding the challenges of living in poverty was the biggest benefit of the service learning project (Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009, p.76; Delgado-Bernal, Aleman, & Garavito, 2009, p. 576-577).

Youth from refugee backgrounds compose an underrepresented population that could benefit greatly from mentorship programs. Refugee youth have a wide range of socioeconomic needs that the U.S. public school system must work hard to address. Youth from refugee backgrounds may have faced traumatic events in their native or heritage countries, and could face many challenges in their resettlement countries—discrimination, poverty, mental illness, language acquisition—in addition to serious academic challenges (“Mentoring Immigrant,” 2009, p. 8-9, Griffiths, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2009, p. 33). Additionally, refugee youth often come from situations where they have missed several years of school, and are placed in classrooms based on age rather than educational experience (Gahungu, Gahungu, & Luseno, 2011, p. 9).

Arriving in the United States with (1) limited English language skills and (2) less educated parents than their domestic peers, students of refugee backgrounds often struggle to succeed in school (“Mentoring Immigrant,” 2009, p.8). Mentoring programs can assist refugee youth to become more fully prepared for higher education and employment, as well as increase feelings of belonging and inclusion (Griffiths, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2009, p. 33). One study found that of the 18 million children in the U.S. who want or need a mentor, only 3 million receive mentorship services (Weiler et al., 2013, p. 237). Additionally, early research on mentoring suggested that within a given community outreach is provided to “represented” youth, while underrepresented youth are ignored (Arnaud, 1999, p. 95).

Since few studies have explored the effects of mentoring on university student mentors, we partnered with a state agency to run a pilot feasibility study on university students mentoring refugee students in their communities. Though state refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S. have some programs for refugee youth, their programming efforts are primarily focused on adult employment. Thus, in offering programs for refugee youth, university mentorship programs fill a

community need. Mentoring refugee youth also allows university students to develop an understanding of a population within their community that exhibits a high level of need for educational and social support. Additionally, just as it can increase a sense of belonging among mentees, mentoring can increase feelings of belonging for university student mentors (Delgado-Bernal, Aleman, & Garavito, 2009, p. 576). Thus, to explore the development of mentoring relationships between university student mentors and refugee youth, we piloted a mentorship program to work with refugee youth in the western metropolitan area in the U.S. We sought to answer the following research question: How does mentorship inform university students' understanding of refugee populations in their community?

## **Methods**

This study was an exploratory, qualitative feasibility pilot. The pilot program was designed to pair refugee youth with college- age mentors who could help them with school work and encourage their questions about university life and life in the U.S. We recruited university students through word of mouth, classroom presentations, and email messaging. Students interested in becoming mentors were invited to apply through a Google form application and had to agree to a background check. According to the literature, the most important factor in creating a strong mentoring relationship, outweighing age, race, and gender, are “frequency of meeting [and] length of match” (Sipe, 1998, p. 21). Thus, applicants were selected based on their ability to make a reliable and definite time commitment to their refugee mentee.

Four undergraduate student applicants were selected to participate in the pilot mentorship study. Student mentors agreed to commit to a six-month mentoring relationship with a refugee student from a large metropolitan area. Students serving as mentors in the program were pursuing degrees in Biology, Social Work, and Political Science.

We partnered with a refugee services entity to assign refugee students to each university student participating in the program. All university students participating in the study received mandatory training from the refugee services entity intended to prepare all volunteers working with a “Know Your Neighbor” program. The program operates in a partnership between the city mayor’s office and the refugee services entity pairing volunteers to welcome and mentor new Americans (“Know Your Neighbor,” n.d.). As part of the training, students received background information on refugee needs, discussed strategies for working through awkward mentoring moments, and were made aware of program expectations.

The refugee services entity assigned refugee student mentees to university student mentors based on a detailed mentorship application and a 20-minute interview, and matched students based on personality and shared interests. The refugee services entity introduced university student mentors to their refugee mentees, and helped with scheduling future mentorship meetings.

## **Data Collection**

To collect data, we coordinated two focused discussions throughout the spring of 2018. We received university Institutional Review Board approval to these discussions with university student mentors. Student mentors participated voluntarily and had the option of skipping questions that made them uncomfortable. Responses were recorded anonymously. The conversations were transcribed, and analyzed later for recurring themes. The first focused discussion occurred in March 2018, and recorded the experiences of two male mentors participating in the program. The second focused discussion took place in April 2018 and involved three student mentors, two men and one woman. A final set of questions for all participants to answer was emailed in June 2018.

## **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data using open coding to analyze the emerging themes. We reviewed the data and analyzed the themes together.

## **Findings**

Several common themes emerged from the focused discussions with university student mentors who participated in this project. Mentors participating in the mentorship program reported that the refugee students they were working with were very behind in academics and were having difficulty getting the academic resources they needed. Additionally, three out of four participants noted that they had taken time within their mentoring to help their refugee student with English. Ultimately, two students reported that this project helped better inform their perspective on life for refugees in the United States and its link to educational needs.

Participants also provided feedback on their experience working with the refugee services entity for introduction. Some participants noted that they didn't receive as much information as they would have liked about their refugee student before they started their mentoring assignment. Other students noticed that some of their questions were not being addressed clearly and they had difficulty working through challenges they were having with their student mentees.

University students participating in the mentorship program told researchers that their students were very behind in school. Thus, mentors devoted some portion of their time as mentors in helping their mentees catch up in school. Additionally, mentors noted that their students faced seemingly impossible odds in the classroom. One participant, Respondent 4, noted that his student was very behind in school, struggling to do basic arithmetic when he was supposed to be in high school algebra. Respondent 4 also mentioned that his student worked at a fast food restaurant to help support his family, and barely had time to attend his regular mentoring sessions. Another participant, Respondent 3, explained that her student, a 13-year old boy, had a learning disability, and struggled with "numbers, letters, [and] writing." Respondent 3 noted that her student had been getting tutoring in English before she started mentoring him, and said that she continued to help him with "basic English skills" once they started meeting.

Respondent 3's efforts to help her student with English highlights another common issue observed by mentors participating in the program. Many refugee student mentees participating in this program struggled with English, and most mentors in the program took it upon themselves to help their students learn the new language. Respondent 2 noted that while his 15 year old student enjoyed doing math, he struggled with reading English. Respondent 2 had been trying to help his student with English by having him read picture books one page at a time.

Overall, two study participants noted that serving as mentors in the program better informed their perspective of the challenges faced by refugees in the United States. Respondent 3 said that though she was always trying to assist marginalized communities, but that her mentoring relationship was more personal. She also noted that the project allowed her to see "how important it [was]...[for refugee students] to see that there are people fighting for them, trying to have a voice for them."

While Respondent 3 noted that her mentoring relationship had informed her perspective of refugee communities as marginalized communities, Respondent 2 noted that his mentoring relationship provided him with "a glimpse of a different reality" and allowed him to better understand "what some people have to go through."

In addition to commenting on their experiences working with refugee students, some mentors commented on their experiences working with the refugee services entity. Respondent 3 noted that she didn't receive enough information about her mentee or his disability before she

started working with him. Respondent 3 reported that,“(The refugee services entity) said (my student) had a learning disability. But I would have liked to know a little bit more...I wish I knew how he was doing in school so I knew what to tutor him on...I don't really know where to start.” Respondent 2 mentioned that he had originally been assigned to work with a 21-year old refugee who was not currently enrolled in school and did not want a mentor or tutor. The refugee services entity reassigned Respondent 2 to work with the 21-year old's younger brother, but did not initially recognize their mistake. Respondent 2 noted that the refug didn't get back to him after his interview, and Respondent 1 agreed when researchers asked him if quicker response times would have been helpful.

## **Discussion**

In terms of challenges, student mentors faced several difficulties in helping their refugee mentees navigate academic struggles. The university students participating in our pilot study seemed frustrated or discouraged by the vast maze of challenges, namely academic, that they were trying to help their mentees navigate. When student mentors went to help their mentees with their homework, often in high school level courses such as Algebra or Chemistry, the mentors found that mentees did not have the basic language skills to complete their assignments, or to ask questions when they were struggling with the material. Refugee students exhibit overwhelming educational needs that can't be met by refugee parents, who may be facing their own difficulties upon resettlement. Teachers also struggle to assist refugee students in the classroom, often lacking the class time and resources to give refugee kids the help they need.

In terms of facilitating a mentoring relationship, mentors seemed to focus on activities their students would enjoy outside of any time spent focused on academics.

Students also noted that they sometimes didn't have enough information for working with their mentees, or this information was delayed in getting to them. Generally, mentorship programs partnering with state agencies may find themselves needing assistance that state agencies cannot provide. State agencies designed to assist refugee communities may already struggle to find the resources needed to run their own outreach programs, much less programs being run by other groups. State agencies may also be more focused on employment than educational initiatives, and with limited funding directed towards state refugee resettlement agencies, educational programming can take a backseat.

These preliminary findings may have implications for universities hoping to build refugee mentoring programs, in addition to providing insight into how universities can form better partnerships with state agencies. State refugee resettlement agencies are often overwhelmed and underfunded. Universities hoping to implement similar programs should keep this in mind when working with state agencies, and offer university student mentors comprehensive programming before assigning them to refugee student mentees. Additionally, university programs should be prepared to address university student concerns, and take a more active role in the mentorship process than the researchers did for this study. For example, university programmers should hold regular meetings with student mentors, or perhaps offer office hours for students participating in the program to stop by and voice questions or concerns. In addition, university programmers should meet with state agencies regularly to provide feedback and to develop clear partnership parameters.

## **Limitations**

This study sought to determine whether mentoring refugee youth better informed university students' understandings of challenges facing refugees in their community. This study's small, pilot-program format presented a few limitations. First of all, only four university

student mentors participated in the program, which made it impossible to collect quantitative data on a wide range of mentoring experiences. Working with only four university students also meant that student mentors only worked with four refugee youth total, providing little information about what different refugee groups in this metropolitan area need specifically. Additionally, university student mentors hadn't mentored before, and didn't know what to expect from mentorship, which heavily affected their experience working with refugee youth.

## **Implications**

Our pilot program study revealed several crucial implications for universities hoping to institute similar refugee mentorship programs on their college campuses. First of all, university students need to be aware of the academic challenges facing refugee youth before serving as their mentors. All university students participating in our pilot study seemed frustrated or discouraged by the vast maze of challenges, namely academic, that they were trying to help their mentees navigate. Universities hoping to institute a refugee mentorship program at their schools should be advised of refugee students' overwhelming educational needs, and perhaps design programs that tackle one or two academic issues specifically. For example, a university could institute a refugee mentorship program specifically focused on English and writing skills, which can help keep the program focused on targeting on specific academic challenge.

Additionally, state refugee resettlement agencies, which are often underfunded and focused on refugee employment initiatives, might find themselves unable to provide the assistance that universities need when constructing refugee mentorship program. Nevertheless, university programmers must interact with state organizations to best assist each other's needs. Universities are in a unique position to fulfill the need in many refugee communities for educational resources, which state agencies often cannot provide, as universities often receive mandates to work with their communities. Additionally, community engaged learning can be a rewarding educational experience for university students of any discipline. Community engaged learning can also be beneficial for refugee students who are considering college. For refugee students already attending college, refugee mentorship programs can be seen as a way to give back to their community.

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