

Youth Initiated Mentoring

Natural mentoring + youth engagement = stronger outcomes

Recruitment and case management are two ongoing high-budget line items for mentoring programs. Youth initiated mentoring (YIM) is a programmatic innovation that empowers youth to identify and engage potential mentors within the constellation of caring adults in their lives. Early research shows positive effects of this recruitment strategy, including lower cost of recruitment, and greater durability of mentoring relationships. This white paper will explore the advantages of a YIM recruitment strategy for programs serving at-risk youth.

Program staff that serve at-risk youth are heroic in both their missions and in overcoming barriers to effectiveness. In traditional mentoring programs, the challenges are many. Intake involves two separate recruiting efforts that are conducted concurrently. Significant effort – and money – is spent on recruiting mentors. Many youth sit on waiting lists for six months or longer waiting for a mentor.

Youth initiated mentoring (YIM) is a programmatic innovation that empowers youth to identify and engage potential mentors within the constellation of caring adults in their lives. This innovation builds on the emotional bond between an adult and youth that drives the positive effects of a mentoring relationship.

When this happens naturally, it is called “natural mentoring” and a growing body of research affirms its effectiveness.¹ Most youth develop mentoring relationships naturally and derive the benefits of these relationships. Natural mentoring requires no programmatic support – it costs nothing. And it works.

However, not all youth have access to a dense network of caring adults in their communities, nor do all youth have the social skills to identify and engage them. These youth need help in identifying and engaging with potential mentors.

When mentoring programs empower youth to identify prospective mentors, it is called “youth initiated mentoring”. It enhances the probability of a sustainable

THE FIVE KEY STRENGTHS OF YOUTH INITIATED MENTORING

- 1. Stronger program retention**
Relationships are less likely to fail during the mentoring program cycle.
- 2. Greater durability of relationships**
Relationships are more likely to endure longer than 12 months and result in increased life skills.
- 3. Greater program efficiency**
Recruitment costs go down since the young person recruits his own mentor.
- 4. Greater access to community assets**
YIM mentors live and/or work in the young person’s community, making important connections.
- 5. Stronger outcomes**
Strong emotional bonds are an essential precursor to strong behavioral outcomes.

mentoring relationship while reducing the cost of recruiting mentors – often costing as much as 70 percent of the total cost of a mentoring relationship. Programs that engage in this practice provide youth with initial training in how to identify mentors, then follow-up with candidates that youth nominate with

screening, training, and support. Mentees may also receive follow up training to enable them to benefit from the mentoring relationship.

BENEFITS

- 1. Stronger program retention.** Research shows that many mentoring relationships fail in the first three months.² Disengagement is usually due to low emotional bonds, lack of trust, and misconceptions on the part of either the mentor or mentee.³ This is very destructive to the youth,⁴ and drives up the costs of each mentoring relationship for a mentoring program. YIM dissolves these issues because the youth identifies someone that they already know and trust. Misconceptions are significantly reduced because they already know each other and have some form of a relationship. YIM relationships rarely fail for these reasons.
- 2. Greater durability of relationships.** Hand in hand with “greater retention” is the fact that YIM relationships are more likely to last twelve months or longer. Once again, this is due to that emotional bond and closeness that already exist – the tools of change in a young person’s life. Research clearly demonstrates that durable relationships – those that last twelve months or more – produce significantly higher levels of self worth, social acceptance, adolescent competencies, improved parental relationships, school performance, and reduced drug use.⁵
- 3. Greater program efficiency.** Mentoring programs report that as much as 70 percent of the costs of a mentoring relationship are tied to the recruitment of the mentor. It is not unusual to need to recruit seven prospective mentors for every one that you need because prospective mentors have no bond or attachment to the young person that they are being recruited to mentor. In addition, most case management support is focused on the first three months of the relationship when the mentor and mentee are getting to know each other. YIM radically reduces these costs because it is the youth – not the program – that recruits

the mentor – very few say “no” to a young person who nominates them. Furthermore, intensive case management in the first three months is not necessary; once again, they already know each other.

- 4. Greater access to community assets.** Many youth need practical help in locating and securing resources in the community. Transportation, housing, jobs, educational connections are very real needs for many youth. YIM taps mentors generally living and/or working in the community in which the young person lives; making it much more likely that they will be able to help youth who are adrift to make important connections in their community.⁶
- 5. Stronger outcomes.** Research has demonstrated clearly that strong emotional bonds are an essential precursor to strong behavioral outcomes. Without the trust that develops out of a strong emotional bond, a mentor is unable to build the scaffolding onto which a child acquires critical thinking skills and important connections in the community. The keystone of YIM is the premise that youth identify prospective mentors with whom they already have an emotional bond and trust. Cultivating these types of natural mentors drives beneficial changes and stronger outcomes.⁷

A CASE STUDY: NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH CHALLENGE PROGRAM

The National Guard’s Youth Challenge Program was launched in 1992 to address the needs of sixteen- to eighteen-year-old high school dropouts. The initial design of the program remains the same: one class cycle includes a twenty-two-week residential component, followed by one year of mentored follow-up to encourage lifestyle changes. Matching each youth with a caring, responsible adult mentor is a critical component of Challenge. Programs may celebrate successes along the way such as the educational or physical achievements of their cadets, but the true test of any program is its long-term impact on the lives of its target population. The long-term outcomes for mentoring in the Challenge program include higher

retention in the residential phase; attainment of a GED; successful placement in the military, enrollment in school, or job placement; and lower recidivism for youth who were previously in juvenile detention.

Mentoring is the lynchpin strategy to move ChalleNGe graduates through the reentry stage to successful long-term placement. One unique aspect of the ChalleNGe is the Youth-initiated match strategy. Cadets actively participate in the recruitment of mentors through relationships they had prior to entering the ChalleNGe program. ChalleNGe was the first mentoring program of significant size and scale to use this strategy which has proven to be very effective and efficient. While the average recruitment-to-match rate for other large mentoring organizations is seven to one, ChalleNGe is able to maintain close to a one to one ratio. A high number of those mentoring relationships, nearly three quarters, last more than one year. This is a significant number compared to other national school-based mentoring programs where only 28 percent of mentoring relationships last more than six months.⁸

A number of independent studies support the positive impact of mentoring during this reentry phase. Today, ChalleNGe is proud of the following results:

MENTORING RESULTS AT-A-GLANCE

Graduated more than 100,000 youth to date in 34 locations.

Mentoring is the backbone of a 12-month post residential phase and is embedded within the 5-month residential phase.

ChalleNGe's mentoring program is the recipient of two national awards.

95% of all graduates are matched with mentors; 90% of their mentors are YIM.

Mentors are actively engaged in development and implementation of life plan.

The mentoring component boosts placement outcomes by 50%.

95% of graduates go on to higher education or join the workforce or military.

Cost of mentoring relationship is estimated at \$700 (compared to \$1,000 for traditional mentoring programs).

As indicated in a 2009 study of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program by University of Massachusetts professor and mentoring expert Jean Rhodes, YIM relationships are more closely linked to achieving successful program outcomes than conventional match relationships in ChalleNGe.⁹ Graduates of YIM relationships (compared to graduates of conventional mentoring relationships):

- a. Were more likely to be in contact with their mentor
- b. Were more likely to be actively placed throughout the Post-Residential Phase
- c. Were less likely to use illegal drugs
- d. Were less likely to be obese
- e. Were less likely to have been charged with a violent crime
- f. Scored Higher in problem solving skills, leadership skills, and conventional citizenship scales

In the preliminary findings of a follow on study Rhodes indicates that the method of mentor selection predicted the length and frequency of contact. Youth who selected their own mentors had the longest lasting relationships with the most frequent contact while youth who chose a mentor through some other method had less enduring relationships with less frequent contact.¹⁰

Continued study indicates that ChalleNGe participants who were still in monthly contact with mentors approximately one and a half years after the completion of the Post-Residential Phase were significantly more likely than the control group to:

- a. Have a GED/high school diploma
- b. Have college credit
- c. Be employed longer
- d. Have higher wages
- e. Spend fewer months idle
- f. Have fewer arrests
- g. Have greater self-reported civic engagement

THE YIM MODEL

The YIM model differs significantly from the intake strategies of traditional mentoring programs. In YIM, only one recruitment effort exists. The program focuses on recruiting qualified youth and then empowering them to identify and nominate two or more prospective mentors. Very little resources are actually invested by the program in recruiting prospective mentors. Youth accepted in the program do not wait for the program to find mentors for them – they come with mentors in their back pocket. The program concentrates on screening prospective mentors and training those selected to participate in the mentoring program.

Post match mentor support activities are the same for both traditional mentoring and YIM models with the exception that case management ratios for YIM based mentoring programs may be larger due to the emotional bond that already exists. Of course, larger ratios translate to lower program costs.

Key elements:

Youth application and screening. Youth is advised of the requirement to nominate prospective mentors and provided with written guidance on characteristics of an effective mentor. Directions are given on how to nominate adults who may qualify.

Youth acceptance and orientation. Youth is provided more in depth guidance by program staff in the characteristics of an effective mentor and guidance on how to identify qualified adults in their communities. Practical help is provided to complete nomination process, including the provision of a mentor information packet for youth to provide to nominees.

Youth initiated mentor nominations. Youth identify caring adults whom they know and ask them if they would be willing to mentor them as part of the program. Basic information regarding the program and mentoring requirements are provided by the youth to the prospective mentor. Mentor application is completed and submitted to the program.

Mentor application and screening. Mentor applications are received by the program and processed. Prospective mentors are contacted by the program and complete the screening process.

Mentor acceptance and orientation. Prospective mentors who complete the screening process are invited to a pre match training event where they are equipped to engage in the mentoring relationship.

Match. Youth and mentor are formally matched and begin formal mentoring relationship.

Key differences with traditional program models:

- The sequence of enrollment (mentees engaged and oriented first)
- Youth initiative in identification of mentoring candidates as a condition of acceptance
- Match, subject to background check, as a prerequisite to mentor enrollment significantly reduces the “start up” period of the mentoring relationship
- Tailored training that recognizes and embeds existing relationships
- More natural frequency and intensity of contact based on preexisting relationship
- More efficient training, technical assistance, monitoring, and program management

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

There are two options for implementation.

One is to embed YIM as a value-added enhancement to an existing program as it was for the National Guard Youth Challenge Program. Properly embedded, program outcomes can be boosted dramatically at a reasonable cost. Examples of additional opportunities include programs whose primary focus is school safety, gang prevention, youth offender reentry, or job preparation and placement.

The second implementation option is to establish YIM as a stand alone mentoring program. This approach does not attempt to embed the mentoring element in an existing program, but rather empowers youth to forge “natural mentoring” relationships regardless of their program affiliation.

Program support necessary to implement the YIM strategy includes (1) an eight-hour mentee training program, (2) an eight-hour mentor training program, and (3) a forty-hour staff training program for the value added enhancement option. These training programs may be delivered one of two ways:

- Online community of practice that provides both youth and mentors with training, resources, and expert advice on how to develop an effective mentoring relationship. This Virtual Mentoring Assistance Community (V-MAC) would include a password protected feature for mentors who complete an online screening task.
- Traditional classroom training that provides program staff, mentors, and mentees with live training and a variety of turn-key tools in hard copy format. In the value enhancement option, program staff would be equipped to deliver both the mentor and mentee training onsite.

THE NEW FRONTIER

YIM is a new but promising territory, with very strong backing from both researchers and mentoring practitioners. In tough economic times, service-oriented organizations across the country are looking for ways to remain effective. If you are seeking opportunities to streamline your mentoring operations, YIM could be an avenue to explore. ■

If you would like to learn more about how a YIM approach could be embedded within your program, email info@daremightythings.com

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jean Rhodes, *Stand by Me*. (Harvard University Press, 2002); Zimmermann, Bingenheimer, and Notaro, *Natural mentors and adolescent resiliency: A study with urban youth* (American Journal of Community Psychology, in press)
- 2 Rhodes, *Stand by Me*; Van Patten, *National mentor training research report* (National Mentoring Partnership, 2004)
- 3 Rhodes, *Stand by Me*; Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, *Mentoring School Age Children: Relationship Development in Community-Based and School Based Programs* (Public Private Ventures, 2000); Grossman and Rhodes, *The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring programs*, (American Journal of Community Psychology, in press)
- 4 Rhodes, *Stand by Me*
- 5 Rhodes, *Stand by Me*
- 6 R. D. Putman, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000)
- 7 Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff, *Academic and emotional functioning in early adolescence*, (Development and Psychopathology, 1998), Rhodes, *Stand by Me*; Zimmermann, Bingenheimer, and Notaro, *Natural mentors and adolescent resiliency: A study with urban youth*.
- 8 Jean Rhodes, Liza Zweibach, & Sarah Schwartz, *Youth Initiated Mentoring: A preliminary investigation* research report (2009)
- 9 Jean Rhodes, Liza Zweibach, & Sarah Schwartz, *Youth Initiated Mentoring: A preliminary investigation*
- 10 Jean Rhodes, Sarah Schwartz, & Renee Spencer, *The Impacts of Mentoring in the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program* (Preliminary Findings 2012)