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NASSP'S 2017 DIGITAL PRINCIPALS OF THE YEAR

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MENTORING MATTERS

Mentoring can help underserved students become college ready

BY RICK DALTON



A mentoring program at Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing Visual Arts in the Harlem area of New York City changed Shameka's entire life trajectory: She went from not planning to finish high school to graduating from Cornell Medical College. As a high school senior, Shameka and a group of classmates led an all-out peer mentoring effort to ensure that every member of their class applied to college.

Then there's Eliseo who—after entering his school's mentoring program in Mulberry, FL, as a sixth-grade student—recognized the value of sticking with his education instead of becoming just another dropout. Jasmine, a medical student



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who never forgot the role mentoring played in her success at Booker High School in Sarasota, FL, stayed involved in the College for Every Student (CFES) mentoring program to give middle and high school students a firsthand view of college. And Diamond, now a junior at the University of Albany, says her own mentor helped her realize college is not something “foreign and intangible . . . my mentor helped me understand that I could actually go to college.”

Their stories are individual, but the results are universal: No matter where students go to school, mentoring can help them become college ready. It’s something I’ve seen in cities and in rural areas, in states on both coasts, and in the middle of the country.

Over the past 25 years, CFES has helped nearly 100,000 underserved youths get to college. The mentoring programs at the heart of our efforts spark motivation, raise aspirations, and connect youths with information and people to make life-altering differences. We have found that by participating in mentoring relationships with student peers, college students, and business leaders, young people from low-income backgrounds develop and strengthen their desire to go to college, identify higher education opportunities, and apply to (and then enroll in) college.

First in Their Families

Like Shameka, other students from low-income families who have taken part in the CFES mentoring program are frequently the first in their families to attend college. Through attaining a college degree, they break the cycle of poverty within their families, setting in motion social and economic uplift that can affect not only their younger siblings, but generations to come.

Eliseo is also on that track. “Many students from my community have dropped out of high school, and I don’t want to make the same mistake,” he told us. After his parents left Florida for Mexico to care for a sick relative, Eliseo moved into a trailer with his five

siblings and other relatives. It would have been easy for him to leave school and get a low-paying job. But a mentoring program exposed him to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) opportunities and sparked his interest in pursuing engineering.

At CFES, we’ve found that mentoring helps young people develop college pathway knowledge—how to find, apply to, and pay for college—and what we call the Essential Skills—resilience, adaptability, grit, and other competencies. Despite the sorts of gains that mentoring programs provide, too many students never experience these benefits. More than one in three young people, about 16 million, will reach adulthood without having anyone mentor them.

A Prevailing Misconception

So, why aren’t there more mentoring programs in schools across the nation? The main reason we have found is a prevailing misperception: Schools see the process of introducing a program as too cumbersome. But our experience has shown otherwise. At the outset, a school needs just one champion—often a teacher or principal—who believes in mentoring and who will support its implementation.

A Recipe for Success

Once you’ve identified that champion adult leader in your school, reach out to others who might want to serve on the mentoring team. Then the team can set up the mentoring program, keeping these strategies in mind:

- Decide what types of mentors are most appropriate for your program: peer mentors, college students, community leaders, etc.
- Set your mentoring calendar for the year, allowing for flexibility should times and/or dates need to be adjusted during the year.



- Decide when mentoring will take place—before, during, or after school.
- Decide where mentoring will take place—in a classroom, cafeteria, library, etc.
- Determine how your mentors and mentees will be grouped—one-on-one, one mentor working with a small group of several mentees, or a large group with several mentors supporting a group of mentees.
- Determine how your mentors and mentees will be matched—through self-selection, interest inventory, across grade levels, by gender, etc.
- Recruit mentors for the program. The type of mentors you seek will determine where you look.
- Train mentors and conduct a mentor orientation. Give mentors a clear understanding of the program, their role, and expectations.
- Conduct background checks to eliminate potential pitfalls before the program starts.
- Inform mentees and their parents about the mentoring program and the selected mentors; their buy-in is critical to the program's success.
- Plan a program kickoff—provide a few icebreakers and celebrate the start of the mentoring relationships.
- Have a check-in system in place; mentors and mentees need to know whom to turn to with questions/concerns.

The structure of your program will depend on the outcomes you're looking to achieve and resources available to you. Seven years ago, Ernst & Young—a firm that helps companies across the globe to identify and capitalize on business opportunities—turned to CFES to collaborate on the development of an employee volunteer mentoring program. The company's goal was to help students understand how to apply for and pay for college. With our guidance, Ernst & Young created College MAP (Mentoring for Access and Persistence), which uses a team-mentoring model where a group of students work with multiple mentors to build college readiness skills and knowledge. To date, College MAP has helped more than 1,000 low-income students in 30 urban centers get to college.

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We've found that even after the formal program ends, the bond between mentors and students holds true. That was true of another student named Azeezat, who remained in close touch with her high school mentor when she enrolled at Barnard College in New York. She recalls how her mentor "not only expanded my knowledge of college, but added to my enthusiasm for wanting to attend college." Azeezat, who became a mentor herself, cites the most important lesson she learned and passed on to her mentees: Advocate for yourself.

Advocating for Oneself

Advocating for oneself—communicating and taking action to become college ready—takes leadership and other essential skills, which we've seen develop repeatedly through our mentoring program. While Shameka, Eliseo, Diamond, and Azeezat each have their own particular mentoring success stories to tell, they all share common traits and competencies derived from engaging in mentoring relationships. Incorporating mentoring programs in more schools could translate into empowering millions of underserved youths to lift themselves up and navigate the pathway to and through college, toward 21st-century jobs and careers. 

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