

Innovative

Evaluating the Impact of a Youth Mentoring Experience on University Students

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Introduction

Camp CaPow (College Access-Planning our Way) is a free, week-long college access program for middle schoolers that aims to raise awareness of college and career opportunities, particularly for students who will be the first in their family to attend college. A unique component of this community outreach program is the inclusion of University of Missouri students who are majoring in helping professions as youth mentors. Mentors can help produce positive outcomes for young people across behavioral, social, emotional and academic domains (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002, DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Upon completion of this experience, VoiceThread technology was utilized to evaluate the perceived impact of the week-long experience on the college student mentors. This innovative evaluation project addresses AAAE Research Priority 6.5: “Design and test models for increasing civic engagement in local communities and for increasing the social capital of local communities” (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). Ultimately, this project provides insight about how serving as a mentor at Camp CaPow may impact college students’ attitudes toward engaging with youth in local community programs.

How it Works

Camp CaPow helps middle school students identify their strengths and interests, connects them with a diverse group of youth mentors (including first generation college students), and provides them with the opportunity to visit four college campuses. At the conclusion of the week-long day program, the middle school students present what they have learned to their families, their mentors, community members, and University of Missouri faculty.

This camp is held at the Family Impact Center, a community hub that houses a variety of the university’s academic programs which are operated by students, overseen by faculty, and offered to community members. This highly collaborative project includes the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, the College of Education, Human Environmental Sciences Extension, and 4-H.

Selected youth mentors included students enrolled in the departments of Agricultural Education and Leadership, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, and Health Sciences. The group of youth mentors, consisting of two males and four females, included both undergraduates and graduate students. Three of the youth mentors were also first generation college students. Youth mentoring involves a relationship between a caring, supportive adult and a child or adolescent (Rhodes, 2002), and is central to the success of this program. Six college students were selected as youth mentors through a written application and interview process. Since mentoring is particularly effective when mentors have experience in a helping role or profession and have common interests or qualities (DuBois Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2004), preference was given to students majoring in helping professions who have a passion for working with youth.

Although outcomes on those being mentored are often explored, it is less common to evaluate the impact of the mentoring experience on the mentors themselves. For this project, the program director developed semi-structured interview questions based on suggestions by Creswell (Creswell, 1998) and used VoiceThread technology to conduct an online focus group exploring the impact of the mentoring experience on the youth mentors. VoiceThread is a multimedia

platform that can be used as a tool for educators, evaluators, and researchers to gather focus group data asynchronously and virtually. Practitioners may find virtual focus groups to be helpful when connecting with people who face time constraints or geographic distances (Warner, 2014). Additionally, VoiceThread can assist with the creation of an interpersonal environment that promotes deeper reflection (Bandura, 1977). Depending on the nature of the questions and probes, VoiceThread technology provides a way for focus group participants to reflect on three levels. They can react to their experiences, elaborate on their thoughts or the thoughts of others, and even contemplate challenges when feedback is provided by the evaluator (Surbeck, Han, & Moyer, 1991).

Results/Implications

In-depth analysis of the online discussion among the youth mentors revealed key statements that describe their experiences in working with the middle school students. Three essential themes emerged from the VoiceThread focus groups. Significant comments from youth mentors have been withheld for the sake of brevity.

- **Practical Application of Knowledge and Skills Learned in a Classroom**

Youth mentors reported that although you learn best practices for certain situations in a classroom, you really don't have an opportunity to appreciate how difficult some circumstances can be until you are thrown into them. Youth mentors were reminded of the importance of recognizing various learning styles in students, and that they need to be prepared to work with each student in a way that best meets his or her needs.

- **Working with Diverse Groups**

The group of middle school campers and the group of mentors were diverse in regard to socioeconomic status, family structure, gender, race, and educational background. Youth mentors noted that campers seemed most drawn to a youth mentor they could identify with in some way. Youth mentors also reported becoming aware of intersectionality, and how social locations influence the decisions middle school students make.

- **Making a Difference**

Mentors agreed that they had made an impact on the middle school students they worked with. Their feedback they received from faculty members, community members, students, and their families reaffirmed the importance of their work. Several mentors expressed a desire to serve as a mentor again for the 2017 camp.

Focus group data collected via VoiceThread suggest that serving as a youth mentor in a community outreach program can positively impact college students who are preparing for careers in helping professions.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

It is a win-win situation for universities to consider ways to include college students as youth mentors in non-formal educational programs. By providing youth mentorship opportunities, community outreach programs gain assistance from caring young adults while simultaneously providing opportunities for practical application of classroom learning for students in the helping professions.

Costs/Resources

There was not any cost to the mentorship aspect of this camp. Mentors donated their time, and some of them chose to earn an hour of elective credit for their work.

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