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Serving Syracuse Youth Through Mentorship

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Abstract

This project seeks to explore the use of mentorship as an intervention mechanism for at-risk youth in Syracuse, living with the consequences of poverty and community violence. The first part is an interview-based study that analyzes the effects on youth and mentors that participate in mentorship programs in Syracuse, New York focusing on the reciprocal nature of those benefits. While mentors guide urban youth through academic, social, and personal challenges, this study finds the principal benefits to the mentees interviewed were exposure to new opportunities and improved interpersonal and communication skills. Furthermore, the mentors themselves felt the relationship was an eye-opening experience and changed their perspectives of the community. The second part of the project is action-oriented, seeking to understand and address the challenges of recruiting enough mentors to serve the youth in need of them. In a partnership with P.E.A.C.E. Inc. Big Brothers Big Sisters Program, I conducted research on mentor recruitment, developed a recruitment strategy and deliverables to enable them to better serve youth.

Executive Summary

This two-part project centers on youth mentorship programs, using Syracuse, New York as a case study. The first part of the project explores the use of mentorship as an intervention mechanism for at-risk youth and the resulting benefits of the relationship for both mentors and mentees. Urban youth in Syracuse can be considered at-risk of dropping out of school or becoming entangled in criminal activity for various reasons such as the effects of poverty or the influences of gang and community violence. The Syracuse City School District has a 55% high graduation rate, well under the average for New York State. I first examine the concept that mentorship could be used as an intervention mechanism; meaning can help guide youth through various societal challenges and have higher aspirations for their futures. However, the literature on mentorship emphasizes the benefits to youth and largely excludes benefits to the mentors. This study focuses on the reciprocal nature of the benefits derived in mentoring relationships, drawing on in-depth interviews of mentor and mentee pairs.

From interviewing five mentors and their respective mentees from the Syracuse City School District Mentoring Program as well as the P.E.A.C.E. Inc. Big Brothers and Big Sisters (BBBS) Program, I noticed patterns in their descriptions of the outcomes of the relationships. Though this study had a small sample size, the relationships or “one shot case studies” did demonstrate some findings. First, the interviews supported the idea that there is a need for mentorship in the Syracuse community. The mentees demonstrated increased awareness and exposure to new opportunities as well as improved interpersonal relationships and communication skills. For the mentors interviewed, the effects were perhaps more important—they felt their eyes had been opened to experiences of others and felt their perspective on the community changed. Mentorship, in the case of the sample interviewed, helped community and

class integration in Syracuse. The interviews also explored when mentorship fails as an intervention mechanism.

Building off the initial study, the second piece of this project is an “action plan” to address the challenge of recruiting enough mentors to serve the youth in Syracuse. When working with Big Brothers Big Sisters, they expressed their most pressing need was recruiting enough mentors for the youth on their waitlist. Specifically, they had a shortage of male mentors. For every “Little” that was matched with a “Big,” another youth was on the waitlist and had been for sometimes over a year. While they had more success with short-term mentorship programs such as the school-based and corporate mentorship programs, finding long-term one-on-one mentors was a challenge. I then shifted my research to tackle the questions of why was it so difficult to recruit mentors. And more importantly, what is the best way to address this recruitment challenge? I conducted a second literature review, surveys of current Big Brothers Big Sisters mentors, follow-up interviews and contacted other Big Brother Big Sisters chapters in the region to explore the concerns of becoming a Big and the barriers to recruitment.

This research on mentor recruitment led to a new recruitment strategy for Big Brothers Big Sisters, “Bigs Recruit Bigs,” focusing on personal referrals and ways to enable Bigs to recruit friends, family and coworkers. A second piece of the strategy focused on transitioning short-term school-based and corporate Bigs, already exposed to the program, to long-term mentors for youth.

Through this project, I became not only better educated about the challenges that Syracuse youth face and the importance of mentorship, but also was able to take action to help address these challenges.

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Chapter 1

A Case Study for Action

In New York State, the average high school graduation rate for the 2014-2015 year was 78.1%. The Syracuse City School District (SCSD) rate was only 55%, the highest it had been in eight years. One of the high schools in the district had a 34% graduation rate.¹ That same year, Syracuse was identified to have the highest concentrations of extreme poverty among blacks and Hispanics of 100 metropolitan cities in the United States.² Youth in Syracuse face a myriad of social issues, including the consequences of poverty and the experiences of community violence. 49.1% of Syracuse youth under the age of 18 live in poverty. Unstable home lives may affect many of these youths' performance in school. Furthermore, as with other urban cities, many youth themselves become involved in or fall victim to crime and violence. In October, a high profile shooting resulted in a lockdown of Syracuse University and the death of a 15-year-old boy. The other boy involved was 17 years old. Three of his friends lost their lives in shootings just months prior, and he himself was Syracuse's 20th homicide victim of the year.³

Over the past few decades, there have been many efforts made through the federal and state governments to reduce juvenile and gun violence. For example, in 2000 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention created partnerships to reduce gun violence in four sites across the country, including Syracuse. In 2013, the city of Syracuse was awarded a \$1.5 million federal grant to create a gang intervention program on the South Side.⁴ The same year, the program Syracuse Truce was initiated to curb violence and help former gang members

¹ Julie McMahon, "NYS high school graduation rates 2014-15: Search, compare any schools," *Syracuse.com*, January 15, 2016 accessed May 2, 2016.

² Mark Weiner, "Syracuse has nation's highest poverty concentrated among blacks, Hispanics," *Syracuse.com*, September 6, 2015, accessed May 2, 2016.

³ Samantha House, "Teen killed in shooting was friends with 3 other homicide victims," *Syracuse.com*, October 15, 2015, accessed May 2, 2016.

⁴ Mark Weiner, "Federal Government awards Syracuse \$1.5 million for new effort to battle gang violence," *Syracuse.com*, September 23, 2013, accessed May 2, 2016.

rebuild their lives. Private programs such as Say Yes, launched in 2008, also came into existence to support Syracuse youth pursuing higher education.

Syracuse, along with other urban communities, tackles issues that affect youth and communities through mentorship programs. These programs, such as the national Big Brothers Big Sisters program rose to prominence in the past decade. In 2011, more than three million youth were served through 5,000 mentoring programs.⁵

Many of these mentoring programs operate with the intention of serving as an intervention mechanism for “at-risk” youth and aim to provide benefits across the aspects of youth development, including behavioral, social, emotional and academic outcomes. One-on-one mentoring programs exist at the school-level as well as through nonprofit and community organizations. The Syracuse City School District mentoring program began eight years ago and sought to provide an adult mentor to all SCSD students who asked for one beginning with middle school students. They partner with established mentoring organizations such as 100 Black Men of Syracuse as well as student organizations at Syracuse University such as JUMPNation. This organization was first started at Binghamton University, after a shooting involving an 8th grade student.

The president of the nonprofit organization 100 Black Men of Syracuse, Vincent Love, expressed this reason for mentoring:

“One of the things that’s so fulfilling for me is that when I look back to my own childhood, growing up here in the streets of Syracuse, I can remember older gentlemen — because I didn’t have a father in my household — but I can remember older gentlemen in the neighborhoods that played an important role in my growing up. And some of them may not necessarily have been what society would call a role model, but at the same time, they instilled in me a foundation of:

⁵ David L. Dubois, et al., “How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 12, no. 2 (2011): 57

‘That’s not right,’ ‘You shouldn’t be here,’ ‘You’re too young to be involved in this.’”⁶

I had my own experiences working with youth in the Syracuse City School District, through M.E.S.H. (Making Expression and Scholarship Heard), a student-run creative writing and empowerment program. I encountered many youths who expressed the need for role models and mentors in their lives. They spoke of peers who become involved in truancy and violence because they followed in the footsteps of elder family members or peers to whom they looked up. I have seen young men who do not have a stable adult male presence in their lives and seek a role model that has accomplished similar goals. For youth who do not have a strong tradition of higher education in their family, they often benefit from exposure to individuals who have pursued higher aspirations and found professional success.

During my college career, I became a one-on-one mentor to a young female student at Expeditionary Learning Middle School in the Valley of Syracuse for over two years. On our first meeting, she expressed to me her desire for a “big sister” because she was not close to hers. Her own sister was a young mother at 16, and some of her family was involved in drug activity or incarcerated. She wanted a mentor to be able to talk to someone about the turmoil her family was going through, guidance through social issues and schoolwork. My mentee and her family moved out of Syracuse last year and I find myself always wondering if our relationship made a positive impact on her academic and personal life. When considering the substantial issues that affect Syracuse youth and keep them from pursuing their unrealized talents and ambitions, does part of the solution lie in youth mentorship programs? How do these relationships affect mentors and the community as a whole?

⁶ Maureen Nolan, “100 Black Men of Syracuse offers role models to city youths,” *Syracuse.com*, September 13, 2010, accessed May 2, 2016.

In my four years, I sought to become a member of not only the campus community but the city community as well. I dedicated the last two years to delving into the benefits of mentorship for both youth and the mentors themselves as well as the issues of mentor recruitment, in the hopes of being able to affect positive change in the community.

Literature Review

Though formal mentoring programs have existed for over a hundred years—the national Big Brothers Big Sisters program for example was founded in 1904—they have gained more prominence since the 1980s. The literature surrounding the effects of mentorship for at-risk youth is still relatively new and with a lot of room for further research and evaluation of programs. Research on mentorship builds off other bodies of literature such as on the influence of after-school programming, the psychosocial relationships between counselors and youth, and interpersonal concepts such as attachment theory.

Furthermore, since there is so much variance in the structure of mentorship programs as well as the mentor/mentee participants in terms of ages, race, environmental or individual risk, etc., the studies and literature on the topic approach it from various angles. Some analyze the influence of mentorship and programming for a particular race or ethnicity, like Woodland's review of the literature on programs for young black males,⁷ and a 2014 examination of the models of mentorship for Hispanic students specifically.⁸ Others examine the effectiveness and effect size of mentorship programs, with both quantitative and qualitative research. Much of the literature aims to identify what makes mentoring relationships successful and what makes them fail. A portion of the literature examines the relationship from the mentor side, for example the perspectives of professional mentors and college-student mentors. Others still examine the effects of mentorship on mentees through developmental stages.

Each study focuses on and illuminates different parts of the mentorship field, especially

⁷ Woodland, Malcolm H., "Whatcha Doin' After School? A review of the Literature on the Influence of After- School Programs on Young Black Males," *Urban Education* 43, no. 5 (2008).

⁸ Cody B. Cox, et al., "What do Hispanic Students Want in a Mentor? A Model of Protégé Cultural Orientation, Mentorship Expectations and Performance," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 13, no. 4 (2014).

as many use differing programs for case studies. However, there are some consistent findings throughout. Chiefly, mentorship programs are an effective intervention for youth across multiple developmental domains and a wide range of participants. Researchers in the field agree that the effect size is small and short-term. The long-term effects of mentoring largely remain unexplored. Moreover, the evaluations of mentoring programs have not assessed key outcomes such as prevention of juvenile offending and obesity. There are also no agreed-on standards for evaluating the success of mentoring relationships or programs and studies are left free to examine different domains and outcomes.

Firstly, a number of researchers examine the overall effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth and adolescents, and what makes them effective or not. Sipe reviews the research on mentoring programs from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. As with many others, she examines programs with varying structures. Some include group mentoring, some one-on-one mentoring only, and others utilize a combination of mentoring strategies. The Big Brothers Big Sisters evaluation had the most convincing evidence that one-on-one mentoring by itself can create a positive influence in the lives of youth. The effectiveness of mentorship relies not only on the quality of implementation and support by the program but also the approach of the mentor. Therefore, not every mentoring relationship/program will produce tangible benefits.⁹

Mentors who build trust and become friends with youth or involve mentees in decision-making are more effective than goal-oriented, “prescriptive” or authoritative mentors. The accepted definition of a mentor is a non-parental adult; the research shows that mentors who adopt a parental or teacher role do not exhibit the same trust and progress with their mentees.

⁹ Cynthia L. Sipe, “Mentoring Programs for Adolescents: A Research Summary,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 31 (2002).

Additionally, programs that include extensive screening, training, matching practices and regular support are far more likely to produce successful outcomes. Sipe and Dubois et al. find that characteristics of mentors such as age, race and gender do not correlate with frequency of meetings with mentees, length of relationship or ultimate satisfaction. However, most mentees continue to request same-race mentors and programs generally aim to support this choice. Cross-race matches that do exist have the same likelihood of producing positive relationships.

Dubois et al. conducted two assessments of mentoring programs in 2007 and again in 2011, finding each time that mentoring relationships influence positive paths of development for youth at least short-term, but with a small effect size. However, the non-mentored youth in comparison exhibited declines in outcome measures. Like Sipe, they find the quality and practices of the program are necessary for the positive gains. Short-term mentoring relationships, or ones that terminate early, can even have a detrimental affect on the youth involved. Programs that are confined to the school setting tend to be less enduring. The multiple domains in which youth benefit from mentoring include emotional/psychological, problem/high-risk behavior, social competence, academic/educational, and career/employment.¹⁰ Both the 2011 assessment by Dubois et al, and Pryce find that emotional attunement of the mentor is a key factor in the success of mentoring relationships.¹¹

Specifically, the positive influences of mentoring include demonstrating positive relationships with adults, identity development for youth such as possible selves and paths for the future, and emotional management of negative experiences. Grades and academic achievement, as well as school attendance generally improve for mentored youth. However,

¹⁰ Dubois et al., 60.

¹¹ Julia Pryce, "Mentor Attunement: An Approach to Successful School-based Mentoring Relationships, *Child & Adolescents Social Work Journal* 29, (2012).

findings do not indicate effects on substance use, or conclusive evidence on preventing juvenile offending and obesity. Furthermore, youth dealing with extreme individual risk factors may be in need of other interventions like professional therapy instead of mentoring. Attunement with youth based on verbal and non-verbal cues, empathic understanding, authenticity and mutual regard are essential to both therapeutic and mentoring relationships.¹²

Rhodes et al. studied how mentors can influence developmental outcomes, stating attachment theory as primary evidence. Youth turn to mentors in times of stress for security and stability. This supports the idea that inconsistent or early-terminated relationships can be detrimental instead. Mentors also act as positive role models that exhibit opportunities for success for youth which may otherwise not be exposed. They raise the question to the extent that which mentors serve as attachment figures versus friendship figures, especially since mentors that approach the relationships as a friend instead of an authoritative figure build stronger relationships with mentees.¹³

From the mentee perspective, mentors that are authentic, empathic and act as companions fostered the most beneficial mentoring relationships. Thomson et al. supported that mentoring relationships helped youth form positive relationships with other adults and peers. However, the developmental stage of the mentees influenced what they perceived as a helpful mentor or desired in one.¹⁴ Liang et al. found middle schoolers idolized their mentors and when mentors revealed flaws, it harmed the mentee's perception of them. Whereas for older students, they learned from mentors' strengths and weaknesses and felt discovering those flaws made for

¹² Pryce, 286.

¹³ Jean E. Rhodes et al., "A Model for the Influence of Mentoring Relationships on Youth Development," *Journal of Community Psychology* 34, no. 6 (2006)

¹⁴ Nicole Renick Thomson, and Debra H., Zand, "Mentees' Perceptions of Their Interpersonal Relationships: The Role of the Mentor-Youth Bond," *Youth 7 Society* 41, no. 3 (2010).

a more authentic relationship. Similarly, mutuality in the relationship was important to older adolescents whereas middle schoolers perceived themselves as recipients in the relationship with less of a “give and take” dynamic.¹⁵

Though less of the literature examines mentorship benefits for mentors, some research does look at affects on the mentorship relationship from their side. Leyton-Armakan et al. found that in college women mentors, their own depression and social/emotional issues negatively impacted their ability to serve as effective mentors to female youth. On the other hand, female youth were also more likely than males to terminate mentoring relationships early. For all mentors, initial self-worth and self-efficacy is related to positive mentee outcomes. Leyton-Armakan et al. indicate the need for more research on how certain mentors establish meaningful relationships across race or culture, and assess the improvements of aspects such as self-worth, cultural empathy and mental health for the mentors during the program.¹⁶

Weiler et al. studied college mentors and the benefits of service learning through mentorship and found that college students improved in awareness of community problems, sense of social responsibility, diversity skills and feelings of self-efficacy. They were also more likely to participate in future community service and sometimes experienced improved health, insight into one’s own childhood and public recognition.¹⁷ The success of the service-learning program studied in providing these outcomes relied on the close monitoring and reflection aspects of the course. Further research could explore how and why mentoring relationships can benefit the mentor and to what extent.

¹⁵ Belle Liang et al., “Mentoring relationships from early adolescence through emerging adulthood: A qualitative analysis,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 72 (2008).

¹⁶ Jen Leytoon-Armakan, “Effective Youth Mentors: The Relationship Between Initial Characteristics of College Women Mentors and Mentee Satisfaction and Outcome,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 40, no. 8 (2012).

¹⁷ Lindsey Weiler et al., “Benefits Derived by College Students from Mentoring At-Risk Youth in a Service- Learning Course,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2012).

The majority of mentoring programs use volunteer adults from the community; however, a small number of programs serve youth with full-time professional mentors with a number of mentees. Because of the “professionalism” aspects, mentors reported that they were able to build more expertise and exhibited a higher level of commitment to the youth they served. This study by Lakind et al. also failed to examine the benefits or changes to the mentors from being involved in these relationships.¹⁸

Finally, though the literature shows mentorship has a positive influence on the lives of youth to some extent, there remains a large discrepancy between the numbers of youth requesting mentors and adults who are willing to mentor. Through my research, I hope to examine the efficacy of mentorship programs in Syracuse particularly. One of the reasons why Syracuse is an interesting place to examine the reciprocity or mutual impact in mentoring relationships is the vast disparity that exists between the urban low-income population and the middle-class to wealthy population on the suburban outskirts or of Syracuse University. Many of the mentors that participated in my project were from different racial and economic backgrounds than their mentees. Furthermore, I hope to see whether mentorship is effective in dealing with the effects of violence and consequences of poverty in Syracuse, or if the youth here are still in need of other forms of intervention.

¹⁸ Davielle Lakind et al., “Mentoring Youth at High Risk: The Perspectives of Professional Mentors,” *Child Youth Care Forum* (2014).

Chapter Two

Methods

Though the effects of mentorship programs on youth can be looked at quantitatively, in terms of grades, attendance, graduation rate, suspensions, etc., since I aimed to take an in-depth look at the personal impacts as well, on both the mentors and mentees, a qualitative study fit best. I conducted 11 individual interviews with mentors and mentees separately so they felt they could speak freely about their experiences.

In the interviews, I asked questions chronologically. For the mentees, I inquired about the personal and academic experiences they had before joining the mentorship program, their process of getting a mentor and what they were looking for, before moving on to the mentoring relationship, its goals and impacts, and finally future plans. For the mentors, I followed a similar pattern, their inspirations for becoming a mentor, followed by the impacts of the relationship on each of them, and future involvement with the mentoring program. I made sure to ask about previous mentees as well, as most of the mentors had at least one prior to their current match. Furthermore, I asked all participants about frustrations or issues they were not able to surmount through the mentoring relationship, as well as about the principal issues facing youth in Syracuse in general. Most interviewees answered all questions, though with varying degrees of detail. The interviews were recorded both electronically and with handwritten notes. Unlike most studies prior, I interviewed both mentors and mentees, and specifically current pairs, so I was able to corroborate or better understand participants' stories from two perspectives.

I then compiled all of the interview notes and analyzed them for patterns and new

understandings. Particularly, I paid attention to commonalities in impact for the mentor and mentee, even though some of these impacts manifested themselves in different ways. For example, both mentors and mentees had eye-opening experiences through the mentorship relationship; those experiences were very different and had different results. However, in terms of exploring mentorship as an effective form of intervention for disadvantaged youth, I looked for commonalities across all of the mentees interviewed.

The interviews varied in length and detail; male participants in particular were less verbose in their responses, and mentees in general less willing to offer personal details than the mentors. Therefore, the analysis of the mentor impacts may have stronger evidence than the mentee side.

Though this study was limited in sample size, it did encompass a great deal of diversity (See Table 1). As a whole, the sample was diverse in age, gender, and race. Taking a look at the mentors specifically, they included white, black, Latino and Asian participants. Other than one mentor in her mid-twenties, the rest were middle-aged. All had steady occupations and most had a comparable socioeconomic status. The mentees were predominantly black, with only one white mentee. Therefore, half of the pairings were cross-race, and half same-race. This allowed the study to examine effects and impacts across races. The youth participants in the SCSD mentoring program ranged from 13-14 years old, while the BBBS youth were both pre-teens. None of the mentee participants had yet completed high school or the mentorship program, through previous mentees of the mentors I interviewed had. One of the mentees also had a learning disability. All of the mentees lived in urban Syracuse, and shared certain family characteristics such as having many siblings, a single mother-headed household or residing with other guardians rather than their parents.

When a mentor had more than one current mentee, I requested interviews with both. However, in one case, one of the mentors declined. Therefore, the information I obtained about that particular mentoring relationship is one-sided from the mentor’s perspective.

Figure 1.1 Demographics of Sample

| Column1 | Gender | Race | Age | Occupation | Mentee Gender | Mentee Race | Mentee Age |
|----------------------|--------|----------|-----|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------|
| SCSD Mentor 1 | Female | White | 54 | Lawyer | F/M | Black/Black | 16/15 |
| SCSD Mentor 2 | Male | Black | 66 | Retired/Usher | M | Black | 13 |
| SCSD Mentor 3 | Female | Black | 46 | Workers Compensation Adjuster | F/M | Black | 14 |
| BBBS Mentor 1 | Male | Hispanic | 57 | BBBS Program Coordinator | M | Black | 9 |
| BBBS Mentor 2 | Female | Asian | 26 | Paralegal | F | White | 12 |

Chapter 3

Findings

Need for Mentorship in Syracuse

Firstly, all of the mentors and mentees expressed the volume and array of issues faced by youth and adolescents in Syracuse. Some were universal issues faced by youth, such as the pressure to fit in at school, or fighting in the family. Others seemed to be characteristic of Syracuse as a city, due to the poverty, lack of funding for schools, and the history of community violence. Many of the interviewees shared perspectives that indicate the need for mentorship specifically to ameliorate the lives of Syracuse youth and contend with some of these issues.

The prevalence of violence in the area was one of the principal reasons that the mentors were inspired to participate in a program. BBBS Mentor 2 said, “The violence in the area, its so bad. You see so many kids that are misguided, and adults that are misguided and end up in bad situations. Well you have to think, they were a kid once.” She reasoned that proper guidance was a potential solution to youth getting caught up in violent situations. The lack of proper guidance, in the form of family support, school support or community support, was a common theme among all of the interviewees. The two male mentees with male mentors indicated that they had no male figure in their life to learn right from wrong. SCSD Mentee 3 described his time prior to having a mentor, saying

“I was just doing bad. I had no type of male figure in my life because my mom left my dad. I didn’t know what was right to do, I was getting into fights and didn’t know how to handle myself. I wanted someone to tell me right from wrong, someone to tell me their story and someone I could look up to. Someone to tell me ‘you can do it!’ without trying to bring me down.”

He went on to say that though his mom tried to instill values in him, it did not take hold until he had a male mentor. From this quote, it can be seen that this youth felt his violent behavior was directly related to not having a male figure to compare values and personal experiences and serve as a role model. Additionally, he did not want this support to come from his mother or someone that would “bring me down,” as in likely not an authority figure at school or in the community. For him, an unrelated male mentor that would act as a role model, was the impetus to make change in his life. This mentee was suspended 10-12 times for fighting in school the year prior. Thus far this year, likely relating to the presence of a mentor in his life, he has not been suspended.

SCSD Mentee 1 had a similar set of issues prior to her relationship with her mentor; she was often suspended and getting into fights with other girls. Many of the interviewees expressed the uncontrolled environment in the schools in Syracuse, that allow conflicts between students to become the norm. The BBBS female mentor commented that one of the principal issues facing Syracuse youth was “the lack of structure in the learning environment and the community. Kids in the neighborhood, in school...they are at a huge disadvantage, being here. It’s just such a chaotic environment.”

Mentors can contend with this disadvantage in the school setting, by encouraging the mentee academically and holding them accountable for their work. SCSD Mentor 1 would monitor her mentee’s attendance, build a rapport with teachers and counselors to better help her mentee succeed academically. Beyond that, she constantly searches for other after-school programs or other resources to provide her mentee the support she needs. The mentor feels that she is the first person in her mentee’s life that portrayed an influential and positive outlook

on academics. Her mentee's parents were absent—her father had a drug addiction and her mother was mentally challenged. She voiced that once her mentee began to have a positive experience academically, everything else fell into place. “Once she had a little taste of success, the fire was lit, and she had pride and wanted to have more success,” her mentor said. After over five years with her mentor, SCSD Mentee 1 is no longer experiencing the same issues, and is working on making the honor roll. She also intends on going to college.

In the single-parent households, one mentee's mother was immobile due to an injury, and another's was busy with work and taking care of a disabled child, to give as much time to the mentees as they desired. Therefore, they also desired another adult figure of support. SCSD Mentor 3 added that the culture has changed greatly since she was a child growing up in Syracuse, that there used to be a stronger community influence on the children. She said that the mentality for most neighborhoods used to be that “It takes a village to raise a child,” and that “You made sure everyone was taken care of.” She feels that is no longer the case, and that children are no longer the priority for families or the community. Similarly, the program coordinator for BBBS, BBBS Mentor 2, said that,

“We as a society have failed our youth. We need to take a better look at where they are and what are their needs. It costs \$1400 to maintain one mentor match...but it costs \$42,000 to put a child away in a juvenile detention center.”

Again, this mentor's statement reinforces the concept that mentorship is the alternative and an appropriate intervention to the problem of youth violence and involvement in crime. This could be due to the fact that youth with mentors have more academic support and would therefore be less likely to drop out and seek illegal sources of income, or because of that guidance that mentors feel they can provide to help them stay out of trouble.

Mutually Beneficial Relationship

The mentors in particular were aware that the mentoring relationship had a mutual benefit and an impact on themselves as well. When their mentees were asked what changes the mentor went through during the relationship, or how they felt they had influenced their mentor, they were all unaware that there was any influence they exerted in turn on their mentor. However, four out of the five mentors explicitly stated influences that their mentee had on them in some way. BBBS Mentor 2's mentee is very religious and introduced his mentor to religious principles and psalms and that he "Made me a better person. I have a better outlook on life." For SCSD Mentor 3, she said her mentee "helped me because she's sharing some of the things that she's gone through. And learning her story just makes me realize you never know what people are going through. Looking at her you would never know what she's dealt with in her past." Both of these mentors changed part of their perspective on life or other people because of the influence of their mentee.

BBBS Mentor 1 summed up this idea of reciprocity. She described her relationship with her mentee, saying, "We both have things to offer one another, we both look forward to spending time together, and we both allow each other to see into each other's worlds in a non-judgmental, very open-minded way." Most of the mentors had mentees prior, and said they would have them in the future as well. BBBS Mentor 1 is considering becoming a foster parent due to the success of her mentoring career. The strength and longevity of these mentoring relationships in particular suggests that impact for the mentor is a principal part of the relationship.

Effect on Mentors: Eye-Opening Experience and Perspective Change

The major finding that most indicates the reciprocity of influence in the mentorship relationships is that on both sides, participants felt that the experience was “eye-opening.” For mentors, particularly ones from a rural or different socioeconomic upbringing, they felt they learned a lot about the very different lives their mentees lead, from language differences, to the neighborhood environments, to family lives. SCSD Mentor 1 came from a rural background and a different racial and socioeconomic status than her two black mentees. She felt she was qualified to be a mentor because she was a parent, however, found that she had a lot of on-the-job learning she had to do when she first started working with her mentees. She described the first year as “hard and depressing,” saying she was “floundering” and searching for support because she had not dealt with issues like the ones her mentees were experiencing, prior to the relationship. She felt that her mentees were “bilingual,” speaking completely differently with her and then with their peers or community members. SCSD Mentor 1 has been with her mentees for five years, and said they have all come a long way through learning from each other.

For BBBS Mentor 1, her change in perspective due to being a mentor has been significant. She said about her relationship with her mentee,

“Sharing family experiences, also her sharing her experiences at school with me is very eye-opening. It keeps me aware of different situations that are going on in the community and in the world, that I personally was very sheltered from, never experienced, couldn’t imagine experiencing. Just hearing where kids are at such a young

age...it affects a lot in my life, even political views, or views on the local area, the local economy, just everything. It's really changed some of my perspectives on things."

This mentor grew up in the suburban outskirts of Syracuse and described experiences that her mentee went through that she had been "sheltered from." She mentioned that places her mentee had lived were not safe, and that her mentee was so used to seeing police cars in the neighborhood, or police at her neighbor's houses and there was even a shooting at a bar across the street from her mentee's house. "Just knowing about different people they know involved in drugs, and domestic violence...they just know too much too young. They're desensitized to it," she said. But the mentor stated that she herself never saw police cars in her neighborhood, and the only encounters she had ever had with police were traffic officers. While her mentee may be desensitized to these experiences, it is clear that the mentor is not and they strongly affect her perspectives on political, community and personal life. She elaborated on the shift in her political perspective, saying,

"I used to be very... 'people are bums and they need to figure things out for themselves,' I was totally against any social services...and now I'm a bleeding hard liberal," she laughed and said she was joking but continued on to say, "I'm just a lot more aware of different things in the community, and aware of things I work and don't work, and more aware of the huge divide that seems to be growing and growing that I never knew...When you start to realize that and it becomes a more personal experience for you, you understand. I think it would be a good experience for people to see these issues on a personal level, instead of on a piece of paper, as a number or a statistic, to actually see it in the flesh and to humanize it, rather than have it as data."

For this mentor in particular, her relationship with her mentee changed her perspective in a much larger sense, transcending the program to her political and personal life. She also felt as though other people who may not understand the social issues that plague Syracuse, people on the other side of that "huge divide" would change their perspective if they had a personal

experience such as mentoring. This impact on the mentor may have been just as great if not greater a change than the ones her mentee experienced because of the relationship.

Another mentor who experienced a significant perspective change was BBBS Mentor 2, although his experience was unique in that it was during the time he himself was a former little brother.

“I lost my mom at a very young age, I lost her at 15. I started heading the wrong way. One day my soccer coach talked to me and said ‘I haven’t seen you at the soccer field lately, are you okay?’ I said, ‘Coach, I’m okay.’ And he turned to go, and then came back and said, ‘Can I ask you a question?’ And he said some of the most profound words I’ve heard to this day. ‘Do you think for a moment your mom would be proud of you right now?’ And the next day I went to go see him, and I brought a brown paper bag, with my knife, my gun, my drugs. Turned it in. And I’ve been drug and alcohol free for 28 years. I would not be here without my mentor.”

His mentor permanently changed his life, and that was the impetus for him becoming a Big Brother himself. He said that he wanted to help someone else “stay on the right path.”

Effect on Mentees: Exposure to New Opportunities

On the other side, the mentees eyes were opened to new experiences and opportunities, that ultimately contributed to not only a higher confidence level, but the motivation to achieve in the future. One of the problems expressed by both the mentors and mentees, leading to the need for mentorship programs, was the lack of access to constructive activities and safe places to go for Syracuse youth. Most mentees that I interviewed also had problems with truancy, or were suspended often enough that they were not in school, and then had nothing to do and no safe places to go.

All of the mentors introduced their mentees to experiences and activities to which they would not have normally had access, ranging from sporting events to museum and college visits. Most mentees shared that they gained more confidence, ease in communicating with others, and wanted to follow in the footsteps of their mentors by achieving greater levels of success than they had thought previously possible.

BBBS Mentee 1 said this about her time before she had a mentor. “I was always stuck in the house and I was really bored...and it was kind of stressful because my mom and my dad would always kind of split up. They don’t do it no more but they used to always argue.” She expressed that now, beyond a year into her relationship with her mentor, she is less stressed and more outspoken. She often spoke with her mentee about her parents arguing or about being stressed out. Her mentor emphasized the importance of “talking about things more rather than bottling it up. If something’s wrong we don’t just sit there and pout and cry, we’re going to talk about it. We’re going to address that is going on.” This helped her mentee deal with her family situation, and that combined with constructive activities with her mentor outside of the house, helped her gain confidence. The mentor also took her to her former college at University of

Buffalo, to encourage opportunities for the future. BBBS Mentor 1 and Mentee 1 both commented that the mentee's future would hopefully involve teaching or work in a school setting.

SCSD mentee 1 expressed this change in confidence and perspective after having a mentor: "I see more opportunities to reach and grab, and become who I want to be. I'm an overachiever now. I could be a vet, a singer, a teacher, in the military...I'm definitely planning on going to college." This mentee is working on making the honor roll, has gotten her driver's permit and a part-time job with the help of her mentor. Furthermore, BBBS Mentee 2 who's big brother was the program coordinator for the mentoring program, said, "Ever since I learned about the program, I want to be a big brother and help other people." His other goal is to be an engineer. This mentee has also taken advantage of various opportunities in school that have helped him gain confidence, such as joining the choir, the school production of Aladdin, and the safety patrol in his school. During the interview, he clearly displayed confidence and ease in speaking with me, a complete stranger. His mentor commented that this confidence and talkativeness was new, and one of the goals they had accomplished during the relationship.

Although with some mentees such as SCSD Mentee 1 and BBBS Mentee 1, their confidence was clear during the interview process, SCSD Mentee 4 was somewhat shy. However, her mentor said that the one-on-one relationship they had helped her mentee to open up more because she had gained her trust and was able to share personal stories with her. Her mentee felt that she was more secure in herself now and appreciated the outlet to share details about her life with someone. SCSD Mentee 4 also said, "Because she has taught me a lot, and since I look up to her, I would want to do the same thing that she does...help people." She

particularly wants to help people by being a traveling nurse. This mentor/mentee pair uses visualization as a strategy to accomplish goals and believe in new opportunities. The mentor helped her mentee apply to a more selective high school, telling her to “see yourself walking down the halls of the school, see yourself there.” Moreover, she emphasizes the important of self-sufficiency and being secure in oneself.

“I try and teach her to be secure in who she is, teach her finances and about money and how important it is to put something away. We talk about how to carry yourself and how your body is your temple and you should protect all that beauty. I tell her to respect herself and not allow anyone to disrespect her, because the best person to love her is herself.”

SCSD Mentor 3 felt that young women in Syracuse do not have professional role models and many girls look for men to validate who they are, and that is how they end up as young mothers or not missing out on opportunities. She hopes that by opening her mentee up to life skills like financial literacy, building her confidence and security in herself, that she will be able to take advantage of opportunities for success.

Effect on Mentees: Improved Relationships and Interpersonal Communication

The other distinct impact that the mentees experienced because of the mentoring relationship in my study, was improved relationships and interpersonal communication with others outside of the mentoring relationship. While the existing literature indicates that mentees are usually able to form better relationships with adults as a result of the mentorship program, my research shows that the mentees had better social skills with everyone, including adults, family and peers. SCSD Mentor 1 felt her mentees were able to communicate better with others by watching the way that she herself communicated when they were out together, in informal situations like at a restaurant. SCSD Mentee 1 reinforced this saying, “I treat people nicer, I used to be mean. I have better relationships with my brother and my grandmother...if I get mad at someone, I take their opinion into account.” Her brother, SCSD Mentee 2, said that having a mentor also changed how he interacted with others in a positive way.

For BBBS Mentee 1, while she gained confidence throughout her mentoring relationship, she also had better relationships with her family and friends. Her mentor said she understood how to be more respectful of others. “We talk a lot about friendships, how to treat others...how to best represent ourselves in terms of communication.” Her mentee said, “She makes me feel like I can speak up for myself but I’ve learned to calm down when I get mad or upset.” Because the mentees often want to please their mentors and look up to them, and they do not serve as quite the authoritative figures that parents or teachers do, the mentees and mentors are able to have better forms of communication that can translate to other relationships.

Why Mentoring Relationships May Fail

In exploring whether mentoring is an effective form of intervention for the youth in Syracuse, it was important to consider the failures and frustrations that mentors/mentees had with the relationships. Yet, most of the participants cited only minor setbacks and they had little to do with the mentor or mentee. All of the mentor/mentee pairs that I interviewed considered themselves to have accomplished important goals and been “successful” on both sides. However, one mentor had another mentee who declined an interview, and others had mentees prior to their current one, with whom they felt they had not built successful relationships. For the mentee that declined to interview, SCSD Mentor 2 said,

“It hasn’t been as successful with him, although he assures me he’s doing better. He wants to be gang affiliated, and he started sheltering himself, not opening up as much. He’s living in a hostile environment, and doesn’t go anywhere or do anything unless I go to get him.”

It seems as though the relationship with his mentor was not enough to counteract the influence of his environment, and it leads to the question of what would be an effective form of intervention for youth in similar situations.

BBBS Mentor 1 and SCSD Mentor 3 also described a prior mentoring relationship that was not successful. SCSD Mentor 3 cited that her previous mentee was not ready to have a mentor and make any changes in her life. For BBBS Mentor 1, it was not about the relationship with her mentee specifically but moreso her mentee’s family situation. She described her previous mentee’s mother as “unstable” and cited that she had not supported the mentoring relationship and made it difficult for them to make plans. “The relationship was successful while it lasted...I cared so much about my little and I struggled a lot with the decision to end the match because I cared a lot about her but with her mom not being on board, it wasn't going to

be successful,” she said.

This mentor also elaborated on other reasons why mentoring relationships may fail to accomplish what they set out to do.

“Some mentor relationships aren't beneficial because all parties are not on the same page. All parties need to have similar expectations and ideas about what the relationship will entail and how the goals of the mentor mentee relationship will be met. Some mentors and some families don't understand that the relationship is a two-way street, where both parties need to be making decisions together...I think a lot of times mentors sign up to be a mentor and have an idea that something monumental will happen to their mentee, like a kid with failing grades will end up being a Yale trained surgeon because of the impact of the mentor on the mentee. While I am aware there have been stories like that, sometimes mentors have too high of expectations and maybe become frustrated that they are not seeing the changes they hoped. To me, I would be thrilled if [my mentee] graduates high school and becomes employed full time after high school. I hope that she will reflect on our time together as a positive time in her life that she enjoyed.”

The program coordinator for BBBS added to this list of reasons with the fact that the family lives of these children are unstable—they are constantly moving neighborhoods and some even move out of Syracuse, or move from relative to relative. It seemed as though with previous mentoring relationships where the mentor was able to maintain the relationship over multiple years, they were able to accomplish the goals that they wanted to. For the two male mentors interviewed, they had mentored the longest, and both had mentees that had graduated high school and were working. Even if they were just working at McDonalds or in the automotive industry, their mentor considered it a success that they graduated high school, “stayed out of trouble,” and were supporting themselves as young adults. Though all of the mentees I interviewed had not yet graduated high school and were still in the mentorship programs, the previous mentees that the mentors talked about indicated some measure of long-term success for the mentees due to the mentoring relationship.

I sought to apply the understandings from the literature on mentorship programs, to the case of Syracuse, examining mentorship as a form of intervention for youth. I wanted to take the unique opportunity I had to interview mentor/mentee pairs in the community to explore the impacts of the relationship on the mentors as well: the reciprocity of the mentoring relationship. Because of the social and economic conditions in Syracuse, there are clear trends across the city that leave the youth disadvantaged. SCSD students are approximately two and a half grade years of knowledge behind the national average, students have a great deal of instability in their families, lacking the presence of often one or both parents, and are subject to the consequences of community violence and crime. It seems unnecessary to point out that the future of the city is bleak without transformations of these issues and ameliorating the lives of youth so that they can achieve to their fullest potential. Furthermore, Syracuse is a fitting place to encourage mentorship—half of the mentors I interviewed were from the more rural/suburban outskirts of the city that can offer urban youth experiences they may not otherwise have, and both of the mentorship programs utilized student mentors as well from Syracuse University and other local colleges. From my previous personal experiences, I felt as though mentorship had this potential to transform the lives of youth. With the interviews I conducted in this study, I was able to better understand the kinds of changes mentorship can make in the community.

Firstly, all of the mentees I interviewed did report better attendance and performance in school, partly due to the encouragement of their mentors. The mentors would communicate with teachers and counselors, and motivate their mentees to achieve higher. Moreover, on a

personal level, both the mentors and mentees were changed in impactful ways. For Mentees, they improved communication skills that they used to have better relationships with others, and were exposed to activities and opportunities that helped them gain confidence in themselves and find ambitions for future success. Some of my interviews were also consistent with other aspects of the literature on mentorship programs that were not covered in the findings. For example, the dependency that many mentees build on their mentors was reflected in BBBS Mentee 2; her mentor commented that she can see her attachment issues arise when she repeatedly asks how long they will be together. Furthermore, my study confirmed the need for family support for the success of mentoring relationships. And, the “creation of future selves,” was also a visible theme for the mentees I interviewed, as they began to desire college and careers they had not previously thought accessible to them.

Perhaps most importantly, my research showed that mentoring relationships are not one-sided, and just as significantly impact the mentors in most cases. This impact is necessary for the continuation and encouragement of mentorship. The relationships themselves are more successful when the mentor does not just think they are going to teach the mentee or help the mentee, but are open to growing and learning from the experience, too. The mutual benefit is a principal justification for encouraging mentorship. The change in perspective of BBBS Mentor 1, growing from someone who was largely unaware of the realities of life in urban Syracuse to someone that was passionate about local political and economic issues, was inspirational. Like she said, if others were able to gain this personal understanding of the issues that face Syracuse, they would be more driven to care and affect change in the community. They could take the motivation and drive to ameliorate the lives of people in Syracuse beyond mentorship.

Conclusions

My study was small and unable to properly grasp whether mentorship can be the primary or most efficient intervention for disadvantaged youth. From a couple of the interviews, it seemed the influence of mentorship was increased greatly if combined with other tutoring or empowerment programs that provided additional resources and support to the youth. However, mentorship does provide substantial benefits for the students who want to be mentored, and the mentors that go into the relationship with an open mind. Moreover, there are so many youths that are on the waiting list for these mentoring programs, particularly young men, who are asking for guidance and support. And, there is no reason why this need cannot be met. There is a large population of adults, and even young adults in college, with experiences and insight that could go a long way to help these youth, and the only cost is time and effort. These adults would also presumably benefit from this relationship, by gaining more knowledge and connection to the community. For students especially who come to Syracuse from diverse backgrounds, their experience here could be deepened by learning about and becoming involved in the community.

After my study, there are many opportunities for both future research and action that are apparent to me. Primarily, a larger study of mentors and mentees would provide greater diversity and insights. More results of mentorship could also be seen from interviewing graduated mentees and seeing the long-range effects of the mentorship programs. Other interesting areas of research would be how to reach students that are not helped by mentoring, how to best combine other intervention measures with mentorship, and how to target more mentors to meet the need in Syracuse.

PART II

Chapter 4

Action Plan

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Maxwell Program in Citizenship and Civic Engagement, I pursued an action plan that addressed a societal issue. The larger issue that I explored in part one of this project was at-risk youth in need of intervention through mentorship. Mentoring relationships, such as the ones facilitated by Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Onondaga County can provide mutual benefits for students and mentors. However, BBBS currently has 62 children on the wait-list for mentors, many of whom have been waiting over a year for a mentor. This is only a 55% match rate for Bigs and Littles. The problem then is that the number of students in need of mentors, or that would benefit from these programs far exceeds the number of mentors involved. Increasing the number of committed mentors would not only benefit youth but mentors as well and help improve class and community integration. Through the action plan, I sought to redesign a recruitment strategy that would result in more mentors for the Littles on the Big Brothers Big Sisters waitlist.

I chose to use BBBS as the appropriate organization to collaborate with on my action plan because it is a national and successful organization that demonstrates the impact mentorship can have on youth. For example, youth that participate in BBBS are 52% less likely to skip school, 46% less likely to use illegal drugs, 33% less likely to hit someone and 27% less likely to begin using alcohol.¹⁹ And I had built a connection with them through the initial research I did so they were receptive to my project and recommendations for revitalizing recruitment.

¹⁹ "Our Impact." Big Brother Big Sister. Accessed February 17, 2017. <https://www.bbbs-syr.org/about-us/our-impact/>

Research and Action Plan Development

In order to tackle the mentor recruitment issue, I had to conduct different research than the first portion of my project. Awareness of the problem, as well as of the solution was an essential first step in ameliorating recruitment. In a study by Randle et al., half of the sample indicated they would consider becoming mentors once they were aware of the problem. Therefore, an aspect of my action plan included educating potential mentors on the problem itself, and the solution that BBBS provides. I also sought to find out the concerns potential mentors would have and further barriers organizations encountered in trying to recruit mentors, as well as how to address these challenges. Randle et al. also found potential mentors might have distinct characteristics such as altruistic or service-based professions such as nursing or teaching.²⁰ I used this insight as well to shape the Bigs Recruit Bigs strategy, because current bigs may have other individuals in their network with similar altruistic characteristics or professions that they could educate about the problem and recruit to be mentors.

Stukas et al. developed a handbook of youth mentoring that suggested successful recruitment relied on marketing attractive features of mentoring.²¹ I surveyed current Bigs on what they found most rewarding about being a mentor and made storytelling and sharing the mentoring experience a key strategy in my plan. Probst echoed this idea, and expanded on it to say marketing should depict youth with promise and potential and not with problems that need fixing. In a partnership with Etc. Pictures, a local film production company in Syracuse, part of my action plan involved developing short storytelling videos that would showcase the positive

²⁰ Randle, Melanie, Leonie Miller, Joseph Ciarrochi, and Sara Dolnicar. "A Psychological Profile Of Potential Youth Mentor Volunteers." *Journal of Community Psychology* 42, no. 3(2014): 338-51. doi:10.1002/jcop.21613.

²¹ Stukas, Arthur A., Clary, Gil, and Snyder, Mark, "Mentor Recruitment and Retention," *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, (2014).

aspects of mentoring relationships as well as the personalities of the Littles. Michel et al. emphasized the importance of using youth themselves in the recruitment of mentors, which contributed to the concept of these storytelling videos as well as potential recruitment events I discussed with the BBBS Advisory Council.

Finally, Allen and Eby discussed relying on “internal recruitment,” which shaped the second part of my strategy to tap into the captive audience of short-term mentors and transition them into full-time mentors.

To understand better the concerns Bigs first had when initially considering becoming a mentor, I surveyed them and did more in-depth interviews as well. Firstly, I found 44% of new mentors were referred by a current Big. I also found 40-65% of short-term mentors would consider becoming a one-on-one long-term mentor. I also gained insight into the concerns they had about mentoring initially, such as getting along with the Little, not “knowing how to mentor” or what activities to participate in. The recruitment strategy and materials I designed enabled current Bigs to discuss these concerns with potential mentors and address their concerns.

Finally, I also contacted and interviewed staff at other Big Brothers Big Sisters chapters in the New York State region and found they felt word-of-mouth, community presence, and Big referrals were the most successful ways to recruit more Bigs. This research helped inform the deliverables for my action plan, as well as meetings with the Big Brothers Big Sisters Advisory Council and Oscar Vergara, Program Coordinator for BBBS. I helped develop guidelines and recruitment materials provided to Bigs to be enabled to educate their network of friends, family and coworkers not only of the problem mentorship addresses but also to answer questions about their concerns by sharing their own stories. Furthermore, I worked with Etc. Pictures as well as

BBBS to produce multiple storytelling and promotional videos that the Bigs could easily share to depict mentorship.

Additional recommendations I had included on-site activities, that would alleviate the concerns of transportation, financial commitment, and not knowing what activities to do with Littles for Bigs. I also recommended using a long-time Big to run a facebook group for Bigs and potential bigs, hiring an intern to manage recruitment, and using a Customer Relationship Management system to better track Bigs and maintain contact with referrals. The Big Brothers Big Sisters Advisory council was receptive to these recruitment ideas and we have begun to design the materials, and have already proceeded with producing the storytelling videos with Etc. Pictures. Evaluation for my action plan is relatively simple—the success of the proposal would be judged by more Bigs recruited through referrals and result in less Littles on the waitlist!

Conclusion: Reflection on Engaged Citizenship

Citizenship in today's world

Living in Syracuse for the past four years taught me invaluable lessons about privilege, community involvement and the difference that an ordinary college student can make. The Citizenship and Civic Engagement program provided me with a larger context of the powerful role citizens play in shaping the future in a democratic society. My peers, with their own action plans that addressed issues on and off-campus, and set in motion policies and programs, inspire me. As a college student, I would have thought I had little to no influence on large-scale societal issues, on policies, or on organizations that would have the influence to affect change.

Yet I discovered that through educating myself on an issue, hard work, and building connections in this community, I was able to make an impact on an issue I cared about deeply. In a city such as Syracuse, or in any community, there are nonprofits and policymakers working on

solving issues, but they need the active participation of citizens. Active participation begins with being educated about the problem and potential solutions. This project was a useful exercise in researching a problem, but also in finding solutions that will actually be effective. Furthermore, I found mentorship is an excellent example of engaged citizenship that can ameliorate larger societal issues. If mentors help at-risk youth stay in school or find jobs for example, that has a ripple affect on the community as a whole. All it takes is community members being aware and educated about a societal problem, and making a small commitment to engage.

Citizenship in my future

This project inspired me to continue to pursue “action plans” and ways to engage with the community in which I will live, especially because I realized what I was capable of accomplishing. I focused my project on influencing an organization to make small-scale changes in this community, but in the future I want to explore large-scale policy changes that can ameliorate the lives of urban youth. I am interested in further exploring education reform, poverty alleviation, and community-based programming for youth.

I also had a mentee in the past who moved away, and I would like to continue to be involved with organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and am planning on becoming a Big Sister after graduation. I can also see myself being on an advisory council or board of a nonprofit organization throughout my career.

Advice to Syracuse University students

I believe the reason why Big Brothers Big Sisters was so receptive to my action plan was because I had demonstrated my involvement and dedication to the community, through

volunteering at Boys and Girls Clubs, serving as a mentor myself, and teaching in the school district. Furthermore, they could see my passion for the issue and witnessed my work ethic throughout the project. In order to influence others and to make changes in any community, building relationships is necessary. It is also important to find an issue that you are passionate about and you can learn the ins and outs of, and that you will stick with.

Become immersed in this community, not just this campus. There are so many unique opportunities to engage with different populations in Syracuse, to learn from and work with youth, refugees, veterans, etc. Be an active member of your hometown community as well. Practice being an engaged citizen now and carry it on throughout your life.

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