Campus Corps Therapeutic Mentoring: Making a Difference for Mentors

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Abstract

College student mentors are increasingly mentoring at-risk youth, yet little is known about the benefits that college students derive from their experience mentoring within the context of a service-learning course. This qualitative study used focus groups to examine college students' experiences as participants in a unique program, Campus Corps: Therapeutic Mentoring of At-Risk Youth. This course-based, service-learning program utilizes college student mentors to mentor at-risk youth within a family systems framework. In 19 focus groups conducted with 141 college student participants, the student mentors indicated that they experienced significant personal growth and professional development through their participation in the program and that the program positively influenced their civic attitudes and their orientation toward civic engagement. This article provides a review of related research, describes the program, explores the findings of the focus groups, and discusses implications for college service-learning programs.

Introduction

*T*he popularity and potential benefits of youth mentoring programs have resulted in research that explores the effectiveness of these programs. As most studies focus on the outcomes experienced by youth mentees, little is known about outcomes for college students who mentor youth *(Evans, 2005)*. Even less is known about the presumed positive outcomes that college students gain from mentoring at-risk youth specifically within the context of a service-learning course. Our study aims to address these gaps in the research literature and to illustrate the outcomes that college student mentors experience when mentoring at-risk youth in the context of a service-learning course.

Literature Review

Youth mentoring programs facilitated by agencies such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are commonly found throughout communities across the United States; however very few of these programs are associated with post-secondary service-learning programs. This

review addresses research on the outcomes that college students experience through participation in service-learning, through mentoring youth, and through mentoring youth in the context of a service-learning course.

Service-Learning

Valerius and Hamilton *(2001)* characterize service-learning as the practice of students becoming involved in their community in order to utilize knowledge learned in the classroom and to gain opportunities for learning through experience. Giles and Eyler *(1999)* suggest that service-learning programs are one of the primary modalities by which students gain experience and competence in community engagement and service. Service-learning is a unique learning experience in that it provides students with preparatory learning for service, through lectures, course readings, and trainings; incorporates self-reflection; and directly engages students in active service. Schmidt, Marks, and Derrico *(2004)* suggest that the training and scholarship provided by service-learning courses better equip students to provide high-quality service to the community. Thus, training and supporting mentors within the context of a university based service-learning course may in theory enhance the quality of the mentorship due to the academic foundation associated with the specific service being provided. Additionally, the particular context of service-learning is thought to enhance the mentors' experience resulting in an increase in positive outcomes.

Studies that address post-secondary service learning indicate a spectrum of educational and personal outcomes for student participants, including: (1) increased knowledge of theory, and an enhanced ability to apply theory to real world issues *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993)*; (2) increased understanding of community concerns *(Astin & Sax; Giles & Braxton, 1997; Giles & Eyler, 1994)*; (3) increased confidence in one's ability to handle challenge and stress *(Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997)*; (4) greater emphasis placed on volunteering and helping professions *(Astin & Sax, 1999)*; (5) increased sense of social and personal responsibility *(Giles & Eyler)*; (6) greater appreciation and gratitude for past experiences *(Schmidt et al., 2004)*; and (7) improved self-efficacy and self-confidence *(Deeley, 2010; Lisman, 1998)*. Relatedly, McKenna and Rizzo *(1999)* studied the service-learning experience of students from 17 disciplines and found that not only did students gain an understanding of others and an increase in their sense of civic responsibility, but they also gained a greater understanding of themselves.

Several studies suggest additional outcomes for students who participate in service-learning projects with at-risk youth. Terry *(1999)* found that these students better understand the pressures that face children and adolescents. Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, and Southard *(2009)* found that students articulated changes in their attitudes toward, and their understanding of, youth living in poverty or in disadvantaged situations. Hughes, Boyd, and Dykstra *(2010)* also found that service-learning students who worked with youth challenged their own negative stereotypes about youth, desired to help combat social injustices experienced by youth, and experienced an increase in their understanding of how social inequality and poverty may directly affect youth. Schmidt and colleagues *(2004)* found that students who work with youth in service-learning projects tend to have greater confidence in their ability to change the life of a child.

Mentoring

A few notable studies have explored the views of adult mentors and how they perceived the mentoring process, the quality of the mentor-mentee relationships, and the structure of the mentoring program *(Hughes et al., 2010; Spencer, 2007; Evans, 2005)*. Few studies have examined the more personal effects of mentoring that may be experienced by mentors. Trepanier-Street *(2007)* explored the experiences of college students who mentored at-risk elementary students enrolled in the Jumpstart program. Mentors reported increases in their knowledge of child development and their understanding of developmentally-appropriate education practices. Similarly, Philip and Hendry *(2000)* conducted in-depth interviews with 30 adult mentors of at-risk youth. These mentors perceived the mentoring process as a way to understand the realities of youth in their communities, facilitate adult-youth relationships, offer youth mentees support and challenges while viewing them as equal, make sense of their own childhood experiences, gain insight into the lives of others, and create a form of "cultural capital" through adult-youth relationships *(p. 218)*.

Mentoring within Service-Learning

Studies on mentoring, and separately service-learning, would seem to suggest that the benefits of both might be experienced by students who mentor youth in the context of a service-learning course. Mentor training and support have been identified as key factors in building effective relationships between mentors and

at-risk youth *(Karcher, Kupermic, Portwood, Sipe, & Taylor, 2006).* A service-learning course delivered in a university setting is well positioned to provide a supportive structure for effective programming for at-risk youth, as well as enhanced benefits for college student mentors.

Few studies have evaluated youth mentoring in the context of a service-learning course and these studies contain notable limitations. Banks *(2010)* analyzed the written reflections of 25 college students who mentored middle-school girls to encourage their participation in math and science. Analysis indicated that the student mentors perceived benefitting from enhanced awareness of culture, practical experience negotiating group dynamics, affirmation of their abilities, and career guidance. Banks *(2010)* concluded that mentoring within a service-learning context can provide students with an academic, as well as an experiential understanding of a topic. While these findings are informative, the applicability of this study to other contexts is limited by its small sample of all female, predominately White, and not at-risk college student mentors; the collection of mentor responses by co-mentors (as opposed to trained researchers); and that the decision to measure the mentor experience was not made a priori. In order to avoid these particular limitations, the current study builds on these results by recruiting a larger sample, collecting data systematically by trained researchers, and aiming to study the mentor experience from the start.

Another applicable study explored the experience of mentors of youth enrolled in high-poverty schools *(Hughes et al., 2010).* In this study, mentors were asked to provide written responses to open-ended prompts. In their responses, mentors indicated their perceptions that they had gained an understanding of the challenges of poverty, enhanced their character and professional development, formed relationships, gained appreciation for their own life experiences, and reevaluated priorities *(Hughes et al.).* This research suggests that the service-learning context provides mentors with adequate and ongoing training and support, which may translate into greater feelings of self-efficacy in the mentor's ability to maintain a successful mentor-mentee relationship. Karcher et al. *(2006)* suggest that mentor self-efficacy is crucial in building a high-quality mentoring relationship. Mentors reported several perceived limitations of the program: they wished that the program had more organized group activities, improved matching of mentors and mentees, clearer goals for mentors, and improved communication of goals to mentoring sites and staff. The mentoring program in the present study incorporated these recom-

mendations in hopes of improving outcomes for mentors of at-risk youth.

The Present Study

Research has revealed several positive outcomes for student involvement in service-learning and mentoring. Due to the limited research on outcomes for mentors as a function of service-learning, it is unknown how mentoring youth at risk of delinquency within this context will affect the student mentor. Furthermore, little is known about the effects of mentoring on the mentor, in general. This study will build upon the extant literature and will begin to fill important gaps in the literature.

Campus Corps

Campus Corps: Therapeutic Mentoring of At-Risk Youth (Campus Corps) is a unique, university-based service-learning course in which college students from Colorado State University (CSU) serve as mentors for at-risk youth (ages 10-18) from the surrounding Fort Collins, Colorado community. The program aims to provide mutual benefits for both student mentors and youth mentees.

History

The program was designed in direct response to a call to action from the local juvenile justice system in Larimer County, Colorado. In 2009, faculty from CSU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) were invited to a community meeting regarding the status of first-time offending youth. The meeting highlighted a local need to more appropriately and effectively treat low-level youth offenders and those at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. The HDFS faculty in attendance proposed a service-learning course that would address a gap in available community services for youth and in which college students would gain valuable service experience. Situating a mentoring program within a university service-learning course has several benefits. First, it reduces the costs that are typically associated with high quality services because student mentors earn university credits, rather than income, for their service. Additionally, whereas community-based mentoring programs often have difficulty recruiting and sustaining mentors for youth at risk for serious delinquency *(Novotney, Mertinko, Lange, & Baker, 2000)*, being able to provide mentors with

college credits significantly strengthens the ability to recruit and sustain mentors.

Campus Corps was initially supported by a grant from the Corporation of National and Community Service, which provided funding for the development and piloting of the program. The program serves approximately 130 mentors and 130 youth per semester. Campus Corps continues to be managed and supervised by the same faculty who initially developed and piloted the program.

Format

A new Campus Corps session begins at the start of each fall and spring semester. The program takes place on the Colorado State University campus, from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., four days per week. Each youth participant is paired with a college student mentor and each pair attends one session per week; 30 mentor-mentee pairs are present for each day's session. Youth select their mentor from Mentor Profiles, which are prepared by the mentors for this purpose. These one-page profiles summarize each mentor's interests (sports, music, fun, hobbies, etc.), academic major, personal and professional goals, and why the student chose to become a Campus Corps mentor. To provide additional social support to mentors and mentees, mentor-mentee pairs are organized into Mentor Families, which are comprised of four mentor-mentee pairs organized by youth age and supervised by a Mentor Coach, who is an experienced student mentor. Mentor Families engage in many of the evening's activities together.

An evening of Campus Corps begins and ends with an hour that only the college students attend. During this time, the family therapist instructor aids the students with the development of plans to best support mentees. This time is also used for group reflection and debriefing of the students' experiences. This level of support is intended to help mentors experience high self-efficacy in their ability to maintain a successful relationship; an integral component of maintaining high-quality mentorship *(Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005)*.

Youth attend Campus Corps from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. During this time, mentors and mentees (a) take a walk on campus to re-connect, and learn about campus and various professions, (b) work on homework, (c) share a meal, and (d) engage in pro-social activities, such as cooking, sports, and art. Because Campus Corps serves at-risk youth, Campus Corps has created a structure that goes beyond

simply spending time together. Campus Corps activities integrate what is being learned (e.g., rules of kickball and how to form clay models) with developmental assets (e.g., teamwork and creativity).

Campus Corps is held each semester, with youth attending 12 of the 16 weeks. The first four weeks of the semester are devoted to mentor training. A recent meta-analysis found that positive effects were found in mentoring programs of brief duration (i.e., less than 6 months) as well as longer lasting relationships (i.e., more than 12 months; *Dubois et al., 2011*). Additionally, research suggests that an important consideration with respect to the mentor-mentee relationship is whether or not the relationship is maintained throughout the duration of the established timeframe *(Larose, Tarabulsy, & Cyrenne, 2005)*. With program structure offered by Campus Corps, youth and mentors maintain a relationship during a specific timeframe. Youth and their mentors are furthermore sufficiently prepared for the length of their mentoring relationship with one another. Thus, Campus Corps supports each mentor-mentee pair in fulfilling their commitment to the relationship and ending the relationship, when the time comes.

A Therapeutic and Family Systems Approach

Campus Corps' design is unique because mentors and mentees are paired together and approximately 30 pairs operate within a family systems framework during each evening's session. These pairs are clustered together into Mentor Families, which are comprised of four mentor-mentee pairs of similarly aged mentees. Each Mentor Family is facilitated by a Mentor Coach. A family therapist is responsible for supervising approximately six Mentor Families. Campus Corps recognizes each mentor-mentee pair as a subsystem of the larger Mentor Family in which cycles, rules, boundaries, and alliances exist. Of particular importance is the role of the family therapist facilitator who provides expertise in systemic thinking, as well as clinical interventions (e.g., suicide assessment). In many mentoring programs mentor-mentee pairs exist in isolation, but in Campus Corps each dyad is supported by a Mentor Family that is supported by a family therapist. The researchers believe that this distinct characteristic of Campus Corps has aided in its success thus far.

Youth Participants (Mentees)

Campus Corps serves youth between the ages of 10 and 18. The youth who attend Campus Corps are considered at risk of offending

or re-offending and are referred to Campus Corps from a variety of sources including the District Attorney's Office, the Probation Department, the Department of Human Services, the local school district, and other community agencies. Seventy percent of youth enrolled in the program possess at least one charge with the juvenile justice system. Although all youth attend voluntarily, Campus Corps is often part of each youth's diversion or probationary conditions, or treatment plan.

Campus Corps strives to reduce the offense and re-offense rates of these youth by engaging them in activities that will improve their educational outcomes and strengthen their life skills, self-confidence, and productive engagement with the community. Campus Corps allows youth to (a) develop a relationship with a caring adult, (b) practice social skills, (c) receive academic support, and (d) develop a sense of belonging to a supportive community. Current program evaluation efforts are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of Campus Corps with respect to its promotion of positive outcomes. Specifically, through a mixed-method research design, we are evaluating "Campus Corpseffectiveness in deterring risky behavior and promoting academic achievement, self-esteem, happiness, and positive future orientation.

College Students (Mentors)

Campus Corps enrolls undergraduate and graduate students from any major on campus. Students from over 40 majors have served as mentors to date. Students must follow a specific process in order to be deemed eligible as a mentor, beginning with attendance at a mandatory informational meeting and subsequent formal application to become a mentor. Applications allow program staff to identify mentors who possess important skills and attributes for effective mentoring, including experience in helping roles *(Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002)*, sense of self-efficacy, and appreciation of cultural and socioeconomic differences *(Hirsch, 2005)*. If accepted into Campus Corps, students must also complete and pass a criminal background check. Because Campus Corps is offered as a one-semester service-learning course, students receive course credit for participating as mentors in the program. Many students elect to participate in subsequent semesters of Campus Corps, either as a Mentor Coach or as a Research or Teaching Assistant.

Mentor Learning Goals and Objectives.

The program aims to develop students' critical thinking skills and their ability to analyze community-identified needs of youth. Additionally, the curriculum is designed to train mentors to recognize issues related to power, privilege and oppression, diversity, and social justice within the context of their own lives and the lives of their youth mentees, and to increase students' understanding of adolescent identity development. Mentors learn to apply best mentoring practices and other paraprofessional skills including motivational interviewing, group facilitation, record keeping, and communication skills.

Mentor Training.

Students participate in an extensive 20-hour training program prior to mentoring. The training is conducted by faculty from Colorado State University, juvenile probation officers, investigators from the District Attorney's Office, the juvenile court magistrate, and other key juvenile justice professionals. Training includes juvenile court observations, mentoring skills instruction, role playing, instruction in adolescent development, and an orientation to the systems from which youth are referred to the program (juvenile justice, schools, community agencies, etc.). Some students also elect to participate in an optional, intensive training in Motivational Interviewing, which is offered prior to start of each the semester. During the 12 weekly sessions, students receive ongoing training and supervision to continue to support their development as mentors and their acquisition of professional skills. Therapeutic mentoring supervision is provided by family therapists who are trained in Marriage and Family Therapy. A highly selective group of experienced mentors (Mentor Coaches) provide direct supervision to mentors in a Mentor Family comprised of only mentors. This aims to assist mentors with youth interventions and role modeling. Mentor Coaches are also available to strategize how to best meet the needs of individual youth.

Mentor Reflection.

Reflection is a core component of service learning *(Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009)* and therefore formative self-evaluations and reflections are purposefully embedded in students' program experience. Students are asked to reflect on their experience both during the training and throughout the semester. This reflection occurs during the students' preparatory session with

the instructor before the youth arrive each evening, during a debriefing session after the youth have left, and in the form of a weekly journal assignment. These exercises guide each student to reflect on their own performance as a mentor and the ways in which this experience informs their own personal and professional development. In addition, mentors set clear goals for the following week, including specific objectives for supporting the academic, social, and behavioral success of their mentee. By participating in required weekly written and verbal reflections, students are able to integrate their experience of mentoring with the academic foundation provided by the assigned readings and group discussions.

Method

Participants

All participants were enrolled as mentors in the Campus Corps program at Colorado State University during the Spring 2010 or the Fall 2010 semesters. Mentors voluntarily consented to participate in the study. All students enrolled in the course during these semesters (n = 141) agreed to participate in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 (M = 21). Eighty-seven percent of participants were female. The majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (89.5%), 3.8% identified as Hispanic, 2.6 % as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2.2% as African American and 1.9% as Asian. Additionally, a little over half of the participants (51.9%) were in their senior year at the university, 45.6% were juniors, and 2.5% were sophomores. Finally, a majority of the participants (42%) majored in Psychology, with 29% majoring in Human Development and Family Studies, 14% in Health and Exercise Science, and less than 5% in Spanish, Family and Consumer Sciences, and other.

The college student mentors were paired during the program with youth, ages 10-18 (M = 15). These youth were not participants in this study; however their demographics are relevant to exploration of the mentors' experiences. Most youth in the program were male (64%) and the majority of the youth primarily identified as Caucasian (52%), with fewer Hispanic (41.6%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.4%), African American (1.2%) and other (3.8%) participants. All youth were identified by referring agencies as being at risk for future delinquency. Most youth (86%) were part of a probationary diversion program, meant to reduce the depth of a youth's entry into the juvenile jus-

tice system by providing opportunities for avoiding adjudication *(Chapin & Griffin, 2005)*.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University and conducted by members of the Campus Corps leadership team, whose responsibility is program evaluation, not program implementation. Individuals who were engaged in program implementation did not participate in the recruitment of participants, facilitation of focus groups, or data analysis.

Recruitment.

Participant recruitment and consent took place during Campus Corps, two weeks prior to data collection. The Campus Corps program held four separate sessions per week during the given semesters and participants were equally recruited from all four sessions. A trained researcher, unknown to potential participants, recruited students. This individual stressed the voluntary and confidential nature of participation in the study, explained that participation would not affect the course standing of any student, and reviewed potential benefits and risks associated with participation in the research study. A formal consent form was reviewed, signed, and submitted by each student.

Training.

The research team developed a focus group protocol. In order to encourage participants to respond honestly to the focus group questions, the individuals who served as interviewers were unknown to study participants and were not involved in program implementation. Interviewers were trained how to ask open-ended questions, how to prompt interviewees, and how to use audio-recording equipment. They were given a copy of the interview questions to study ahead of time. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, interviewers were encouraged to follow the lead of each focus group in expressing their perception of participating in Campus Corps.

Data Collection.

Nineteen focus groups were conducted. Four were completed in the pilot Spring 2010 semester of Campus Corps and 15 were completed in Fall 2010, upon completion of the 12-week Campus

Corps program. Each focus group consisted of 8-10 mentors and one trained facilitator. Each focus group was audio-recorded and lasted between 50 and 65 minutes. The focus groups were semi-structured, and open-ended questions were asked in order to guide the discussion as it related to the mentors' experience of being a mentor to at-risk youth (see Table 1). In order to facilitate participants' ease in honest and forthright communication, we did not keep record of which statements were made by a particular participant.

Table 1. Select Open-Ended Questions for Campus Corps Focus Groups

How has your participation in Campus Corps influenced you as a person, if at all? As a student?
How has your participation in Campus Corps influenced your thinking about your future personal choices, behaviors, attitudes, activities, and values?
How has your participation in Campus Corps influenced your perspectives on your future as a working professional?
How has your participation in Campus Corps influenced your feelings and attitudes about civic engagement?
How has your participation in Campus Corps influenced your perspective on your ability to influence the lives of others?
How has your participation in Campus Corps in fluenced your sense of personal responsibility for respecting or tolerating individuals whose culture, lifestyle, attitudes, values, behaviors, and challenges may be different from your own?
How do you feel your mentee has influenced you, if at all?

Establishing Trustworthiness

This qualitative, exploratory study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen, as suggested by Van Manen *(1990)*, as a means to facilitate deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the experience. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate due to the service-learning aspect of Campus Corps, and due to the reflective nature of the experience of mentoring. Several steps were followed to enhance the reliability of the findings. First, as described by Shenton *(2004)*, we employed specific tactics to ensure participant honesty. At the start of each focus group the facilitator encouraged participants to be candid, assured participants that there were no right or wrong answers, and reminded participants that their comments would have no bearing on their status in Campus Corps. Further, participants were assured that their names would not be attached to their statements.

With respect to data coding, a team approach to data analysis was used to ensure validity of the emerging codes *(Creswell, 1998)*. Finally, in reporting the results of the study, a detailed descrip-

tion of the findings is recommended *(Creswell, 1998; Shenton, 2004)*. Accordingly, a rich depiction of the focus group interviews is provided and supplemented with quotes that are representative of the focus group participant responses.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were assigned ID numbers to maintain the confidentiality of each focus group. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. First-order codes were applied to group phrases and dialogue into meaningful units, while second-order codes were used to group the units into key themes. Validity was maintained by presenting the data, in the form of unlabeled codes, to the lead researchers who then identified their own codes. Themes that were congruent were maintained in the analysis. Incongruent themes were reviewed and coding decisions were determined by the research team through consensus.

Results

Findings from the current study revealed a significant experience for mentors of at-risk youth. Mentors described change related to personal and professional growth, as well as civic engagement and attitudes. Through the voices of the mentors, it is evident that participation in Campus Corps resulted in a "life changing experience." The findings revealed in the current study represent an important step in beginning to understand how profound the mentoring experience can be. Table 2 provides a visual summary of the resulting themes and subthemes.

Table 2. Summary of Focus Group Themes

Themes	Significant Personal Growth	Notable Professional Development	Valuable Civic Attitudes and Engagement
	Recognition of privilege and opportunity	Application of course content	Awareness of local needs
	Awareness of self	Clarification of professional goals	Family systems perspective
	Management of stress and challenges	Sense of belonging aat the University	Awareness of stereotypes
Subthemes	Confidence in leadership skills		Sense of volunteerism
	Developoment of interpersonal skills		Ability to make a difference
	Sense of purpose		

Significant Personal Growth

Recognition of privilege and opportunities.

Mentors reflected on their own upbringing, family, and education as a result of mentoring a vulnerable youth. Through this experience, mentors gained an appreciation for the positive aspects of their lives. Participants commented on the support they felt from families and friends during their own adolescence: "As I got to know my mentee, I became more appreciative of the things in my life that a lot of these kids don't have." Many of these sentiments were highlighted by their experience in Campus Corps as a result of learning about the often difficult life experiences of the youth mentees. For example, one participant stated: "This was such an eye opener for me, I feel extremely lucky to have parents who were so supportive of me." Contrasts in personal privilege were likely pronounced for those mentors from affluent families. Another participant noted the importance of social support: "Campus Corps made me appreciate my family and friends more. A lot of the kids didn't have the support group that I did." When mentors recognized personal privilege, this appears to have provided increased motivation for mentors to develop positive relationships with their mentees. One mentor stated: "It made me aware of privilege and how people are more privileged than others and how that affects their lives."

Participants also noted gratitude with respect to educational opportunities. One participant stated: "I think Campus Corps just reinforces how lucky I am to get to have a college education." Participants actively thought about the opportunities available to them because of a college education. While mentoring a youth who may be the first in his or her family to graduate from high school, mentors recognized that not all people have the same access to education. One mentor said: "It made me rethink my relationships with my family while growing up. I had all the resources I needed and it made me think about how fortunate I am." This reality hit home for many of the mentors and also provided inspiration to motivate and encourage their mentee to succeed academically.

Awareness of self.

Due to the intimate nature of developing mentoring relationships and the many opportunities for intentional self-reflection that are embedded throughout the Campus Corps curriculum, mentors gained an enhanced self-understanding. In the

mentor relationship, they are positioned as both a friend and an authority figure when working with their mentees and as a result, they become acutely aware of their own strengths and short-comings. For example, participants indicated that through the experience of teaching and encouraging mentees to develop better study habits, their own work habits improved. One participant described: "Campus Corps helped me be on top of my own work because I was following up on my mentee; I became more aware of my own habits." Another participant's comment reflected height-ened awareness of potential discrepancies between their own actions and their advice to their mentee: "It made me think about what I'm doing because if I'm telling my mentee they shouldn't be doing something, then I shouldn't either."

Participants also gained insight into their own personalities. Through written, verbal, formal, and informal reflection activities, mentors reflected on ways in which they felt changed by Campus Corps. One participant stated: "Campus Corps made me more aware of how I show up for people, what my strengths and weak-nesses are, I learned about myself and grew personally." Another commented: "It provided us with a good life skill of being self-reflective and recognizing your place and your identity." Much of the program training engaged mentors in discussion about bringing their "best self" to their work with the mentees. Mentors were challenged to think about how they interact with others, how they cope with difficult situations, and how they take care of their physical and emotional selves.

Management of stress and challenges.

Working with at-risk youth is not only rewarding, exciting, and enjoyable, but the reality is that stressful and challenging situa-tions are also likely. The dynamic nature of mentoring relationships provided ample opportunities for mentors to learn effective stress management and how to respond to challenges presented by their mentees. Mentors indicated increased confidence in their ability to handle such events, as one participant reflected: "I had to learn to deal with challenging situations. I had to stretch my comfort zone. Campus Corps helped me be more flexible." Other participants described awareness of their capacity to handle stressful situations: "I learned a lot about what I can handle in difficult situations," and "I learned a lot about myself and learned that I am able to handle high stress situations."

Confidence in leadership skills.

Campus Corps provides opportunities not only for mentors to practice leadership in their interactions with the youth, but also with their fellow mentors. Mentors expressed that through their participation in Campus Corps they developed more confidence in their ability to lead in multiple areas of their lives. One participant described how having a comparatively young mentee allowed the mentor to act more confidently: "For me, having such a young mentee challenged my views on what to expect. It helped me realize that I can take on a leadership role and help someone. It gave me more confidence to be in that role." Others described feeling "more assertive in authority roles." For some mentors, the leadership confidence translated outside of Campus Corps: "It helped me to be a better leader, especially in my sport" and "It made me appreciative of my leadership role. It helped me see I could actually do this." These experiences highlight the importance of offering opportunities for college students to be involved in leadership roles, both formally and informally. One mentor described it this way: "It is important to think of leadership in your community. You don't have to be involved in organizations to be involved in community service. You can lead."

Development of interpersonal skills.

The reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships affords opportunities for both mentees and mentors to develop healthy interpersonal skills. Working within relationships while at Campus Corps helped mentors develop a wide array of skills in social competence. Mentors most frequently referred to developing patience and listening skills. For example, one participant highlighted how her mentee "made her more patient." Another participant said: "I realized how important it is to listen and how the youth respond to that," indicating the importance of lending a listening ear. These comments by the participants illustrate how, by engaging in active listening, the mentors were able to enhance the quality of the mentoring relationship as well as the quality of other relationships in their lives.

Other participants perceived that Campus Corps helped them become more understanding of others and less judgmental. One participant stated: "Campus Corps made me less likely to judge people. For example, some kids might not do their homework but they might have a reason why." Another participant stated, "Nobody is any better than anyone else. Just because someone

didn't have the opportunities everyone had doesn't mean they don't matter." In order to illustrate the importance of accepting differences, and entering a relationship without judgment, another mentor described: "I learned that even if you have differences from people that being in an authentic relationship and being real helps you build a foundation for a relationship."

Similarly, mentors described feeling more open-minded and less inclined to react personally to others' comments or actions. One participant directly stated that "Campus Corps teaches you a lesson about not taking things personally." Another mentor described, "It was a real patience tester. My mentee was gone half the time. I had to remember it wasn't a reflection of my personality, but a reflection of her being in [a juvenile detention center] and there was nothing I could do." These perspectives suggest that the mentoring experience helped mentors grow with respect to empathizing and validating, entering a relationship with an open mind, and realizing that the actions of other individuals do not necessarily reflect on oneself.

Sense of purpose.

As illustrated in all of the above subthemes, the mentor experience is deeply personal. In the same way, mentors in Campus Corps shared that their involvement gave rise to a greater sense of life purpose. However, this purpose was less related to self-improvement (as in the other subthemes) and more related to the needs of others. One mentor described: "In College, your focus is on yourself. But, Campus Corps gave me an opportunity to focus on others." Another participant added: "It's funny how when you make someone else feel they matter, you make yourself feel like you matter too." This new focus yielded a sense of fulfillment and purpose specifically. As illustrated by one participant: "Working with youth makes me feel like I'm doing something with my life and being productive." Another mentor stated: "I liked that I had the chance to give back to the community. It helped me feel fulfilled and gave me a sense of purpose." Participation as a mentor in Campus Corps seems to have increased many students' motivation to serve others and cultivated an increased confidence in their future personal and professional direction. The next main theme expands on this notion, more specifically.

Notable Professional Growth

Application of course content.

While some mentors were affiliated with academic programs that do not provide students with direct experience working with adolescents or in human services, most mentors were pursuing closely-related academic majors, such as Psychology or Human Development and Family Studies. Mentors expressed that their participation in Campus Corps made their education more meaningful and stated that it "was easier to grasp the knowledge I was being taught in class because I was applying it directly." They found their courses to be more relevant and interesting as a result of their participation. One Campus Corps mentor clearly stated: "The application of the real world part of it was so beneficial, I don't feel I really understood anything I learned in the classroom until I was in the real world." In support of this statement, another participant said: "I understand what I learned in my classes more because of my experience." These participants highlighted the importance of first-hand experience with respect to concepts learned in the classroom.

Furthermore, students expressed that Campus Corps made it possible for them to practice the skills that they learned in class. This made their education feel more meaningful, as described by this mentor: "Some of my psychology classes have been able to be applied to a real life setting, like adolescent development and basic counseling skills." One mentor aspiring to be a physical therapist said: "It helped me realize that you have to motivate people in different and creative ways, based on who they are." Even if the course was not directly related to their major, students recognized the benefit of the experience: "Because I'm a Health and Exercise Science major, I wasn't sure how this was going to help my degree. But, it gave me an experience about life and working with people." Mentors evidently realized that participation in the hands-on experience was important for deepening their understanding of theory and concepts learned in the classroom.

Clarification of professional goals.

Direct service with individuals in the community allows students to be exposed to the profession of their choice. Sometimes this experience confirms their current career intentions and at other times it results in a desire for a new direction. Mentors from all majors experienced this. By participating in Campus Corps,

mentors either confirmed their choice of academic major or career goals or decided to change their major or career goals.

Some participants decided that after experiencing work with adolescents they were not "cut-out" for this work: "Campus Corps steered me away from working with adolescents. It was a great experience and it helped me narrow down what I want to do." Another mentor intending to become a therapist stated: "It made me doubt my confidence and that maybe dealing with adolescents is not my forte." Mentors who experienced a shift in their sense of career direction also expressed an appreciation for the timing of these new insights: "This has given me more to consider before graduation. It opened my eyes to more places and populations to work with."

Other mentors expressed that Campus Corps opened their eyes to career opportunities related to their academic major as well as in other fields: "It opened my eyes to a field of work that I might be interested in down the road. I'm a business student, so this isn't something I knew much about before." For many young adults, university serves as a place of exploration of future possibilities and it appears that Campus Corps aided participants in this exploration. As described by one participant: "Campus Corps was a good starting point to get my feet wet and find out what I want to do in the future." Some participants were able to gain better understanding of what working with at-risk youth entails. They used this knowledge to make more informed decisions about their future career goals. In support of this statement, one participant said: "I want to be an elementary school teacher. I think that Campus Corps led me more towards that because I want to be a positive impact for kids before they get into the system." This statement further illustrates the impact that participation in Campus Corps had with respect to participants' future career orientations.

While some participants decided to change their academic and career paths, many mentors felt a sense of affirmation that they are, indeed, pursuing the right career. For example, one mentor stated that: "I've always been interested in working with at-risk youth, and I've done a couple of programs that were similar. Campus Corps makes me want to do this more!" Other mentors echoed this stating: "It reaffirmed my direction and helped me realize that I want to go into counseling," "This experience confirmed my plans to go to law school and now I have an interest in juvenile law," and "It gave me confidence in what I want to do in the future." It is evident, therefore, that by participating in Campus Corps, particularly at an early stage of career development, participants gain

insight regarding their own expectations of what it is like to work with adolescents.

Sense of belonging at University.

One's sense of belonging at their college or university can directly impact their success in both their major and their career. Importantly, a sense of belonging can also promote retention at the university *(Nicpon et al., 2007)*. Mentors described a community of belonging – a place in which they mattered. They expressed feeling close to other mentors and mentor supervisors. Regarding the Mentor Family model, one mentor clearly depicts the closeness mentors felt during the Campus Corps experience:

> "I think the Mentor Family was nice because you got really close and have a great support system." Another mentor added, "It makes me wish some of my other classes were not so large. You don't build relationships in those classes the same way as you do in Campus Corps. It's up close and personal." Still another said, "I think the Mentor Family is one of the best things that I experienced in Campus Corps. The big group is cool because there is a bunch of people you know, but it's even better when you get down to five people who you know you can turn to. I think it's impossible to not have a relationship with people who you spend six hours with at a time. It's impossible not to get close with them. They become constant support." Participants often mentioned the support they received from other mentors in their Mentor Family. One participant said, "My mentor family was amazing. I had a lot of different struggles this semester and they were always there for me. I benefited from their input and their advice. I really do feel like I have a second family with them."

Additionally, it provided an environment for students to learn from one another. One participant describes, "I think it was really helpful. You can only learn so much from one person, it helped to have different types of personalities and mentoring styles to impact the mentees. Campus Corps was our support group." Another mentor describes how Campus Corps allowed students to network with one another: "I think it was a good experience for us as college students to network with each other too." Mentors described a sense of family among those who took part in Campus Corps, and

a feeling of support from those in this family: "I noticed I gained a whole family and a place to belong at CSU and a feeling of support." Another said, "I had a really close-knit family. One of the girls in my group didn't have a mentee but you never would have noticed it. She was really close with the other two mentees that were in the family. We all just really thrived in the situation. We just really cared for each other. It was a family for sure. We mentors really supported each other outside of Campus Corps too. I think there was so much support." This statement adds to the illustrative discussions about the support and the network that university students felt from their peers. Mentors felt that the service-learning context of Campus Corps cultivated a greater sense of belonging to the University than traditional, non-service-learning classes did.

Valuable Civic Attitudes and Engagement

Awareness of local needs.

Through working with their youth mentees, students were exposed to the reality of the challenges experienced by some families in the surrounding Fort Collins, Colorado community. Mentors recognized that their local community faces great needs. Some college students live in a sheltered environment while on campus. Their sense of community, therefore, exists on campus. Through exposure to the surrounding community, outside of campus, the program provided mentors with an opportunity to learn and understand what their community is facing: "It made me more aware of the things outside the college community that happen in Fort Collins. It painted a very different picture of what goes on." Conversations with participants highlighted their heightened awareness of local needs: "Seeing the needs in Larimer County, such as gangs, makes me aware of different ways to help." Mentors expressed a sadness related to the lack of local services for youth and frequently expressed a desire to promote programs such as Campus Corps: "I realized what a great need we have for working with kids in the Fort Collins community and that we need more programs like Campus Corps."

Awareness of stereotypes.

At-risk youth often have a certain inevitable reputation in the community. The focus group discussions illustrated that many mentors began the program with negative and preconceived perspectives concerning "at-risk youth", but that through their first-

hand experience they were able to challenge and let go of their previous judgments, and develop more positive and empathetic perspectives. One mentor stated: "I had to really re-examine my biases because I came in with a strong bias of where these kids were coming from, but as I got to know them, those biases were blown out of the water." Mentors also indicated that their appreciation for diversity increased: "It helped me realize my own stereotypes; I realized I shouldn't assume anything about people based on how they look," and "You shouldn't be labeled for your mistakes; labeling has a bigger effect than we think it does." Mentors appeared to gain the perspective that the youth served by Campus Corps were not "bad," but rather that they had experienced life challenges and situations that may have negatively influenced their behaviors. One participant made the heartfelt comment that: "They are good kids, they're not bad people."

Sense of volunteerism.

Many of the mentors expressed that through the program they developed a greater understanding of the importance of community, as well as an increased desire to participate in community service and volunteer. One participant described: "Once I talked to the youth and realized how much they value the time we spend with them, it made me realize how much of a responsibility we have to step up and volunteer in our community." Another participant stated: "Campus Corps influenced me with respect to the idea of volunteering and service work. This kind of thing can change a person's life." Yet another participant exclaimed that involvement in Campus Corps made "[me] want to help out with the community even more." Many participants mirrored this statement. One mentor reflected, "I realize it is more than just community service, I enjoyed doing it for fun and it didn't feel like a requirement. It helped me realize I might want to do more of this in the future." Volunteerism and community service—initially regarded as an extra line on a résumé, or forced duty—became a fun and engaging activity. Another mentor put it this way: "I think it's very sad to see people want something in return for helping others. We should do it because we want to help, not because we have to." Mentors echoed this perspective when many of them chose to volunteer for subsequent semesters of Campus Corps as Mentor Coaches.

Family systems perspective.

Campus Corps was designed by family therapists and is organized around a family systems framework. Because of this, mentors were exposed to a new understanding and appreciation for the interactions among subsystems. Mentors described that they now recognize that youth are a part of a larger family system in which patterns, rules, boundaries, and expectations exist. Mentors gained knowledge of the profound influence of families on adolescent development. Illustrating this theme, one participant discussed the importance of family boundaries: "My mentee had parents who had good boundaries and it helped me realize just how that affects the mentees that we have here." Another participant commented on the interconnectedness of systems: "Seeing the factors that play into the lives of youth and how that web influences who they are. Being able to look at them holistically and not try to blame one person or one system is important." Yet another participant highlighted how the program helped him/her understand the importance of helping one part of a system as a means to help the larger system: "I've grown up being involved and I've never thought about how we can serve a family as a whole, not just kids." Mentors also saw the value of considering the larger context in which a young person lives including the families, peers, and greater institutions (e.g., juvenile justice and child welfare) to which they belong. Further, mentors realized that youth also influence reactions from their immediate environments. This new systemic perspective aided mentors in their work with youth by allowing them to understand the chain of reaction involved in systems theory.

Ability to make a difference.

The mentors who participated in the focus groups were asked how Campus Corps influenced their confidence in their ability to make a difference. A few of the mentors expressed that they had a decreased confidence in their ability to make a difference because they realized that the extent of change that is needed is beyond the ability of a single individual. For instance, "I feel less confident in my ability because I couldn't pick him up and take him to school. I felt limited in what I could do." This sentiment is understandable for service-learners. Often, the magnitude and complexity of the problem they are exposed to appears so large that it is overwhelming. Some mentors experienced despair when they realized the extent of the problems that their mentees faced: "I feel disheartened because it took so much effort to make such a small difference

with my mentee. If I can't help one girl, how am I going to make a big difference?"

Other participants experienced hope when they realized that sometimes empathy, understanding and being engaged with their mentee was enough to make a difference. A healthy balance of hope and urgency emerged for mentors taking part in Campus Corps:

> "There are a lot of big social problems in our world, but if no one does anything, there will be no changes. Campus Corps helped me to see that we can affect the little things, and that might affect the big problems later on."

Additionally, many mentors expressed that they indeed feel more confident in their ability to make a difference in their community and in the lives of others, especially in the lives of at-risk youth: "I learned that people our age (referring to traditional college students) can have a positive impact on teenagers and our community." Other mentors stated: "I feel like I am more confident in my ability to change others," "I realized it was just the little things that mattered and that you don't have to make a huge impact to make a difference," and "It's given me hope that I can really make a difference with what I want to do." Lastly, some mentors expressed a sense of relief that while skill and education are not insignificant, a helping hand can make a difference in someone's life: "I realized you don't need as many skills or schooling and you can still make a difference."

Discussion

The findings presented in this article provide an important window into the experiences of college students who serve as mentors in the context of a service-learning course. The current study builds on service-learning scholarship *(e.g., Astin & Sax, 1998; Deeley, 2010; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Schmidt et al., 2004)* and extends it to the mentors' experience of mentoring at-risk youth. Specifically, the experience of mentoring at-risk youth within a service-learning course appears to benefit the college student mentors who participated in Campus Corps. Results from this qualitative study revealed that participation in Campus Corps resulted in mentors experiencing: (1) significant personal growth; (2) notable professional development; and (3) valuable civic attitudes and engagement.

Many of the sub-themes that emerged from focus groups in this study are consistent with findings from similar research studies, and further clarify the profound experience that well-designed service-learning opportunities provide to students. For instance, other researchers have noted that engagement in meaningful service learning has resulted in significant personal growth for students, such as improved self-efficacy and self-confidence *(Deeley, 2010; Lisman, 1998)*, an increased ability to manage stress *(Eyler, Giles, & Braxton,et al., 1997)*, greater awareness of self and others *(McKenna & Rizzo, 1999)*, and a greater awareness of privilege and opportunity *(Hughes et al., 2010)*. Improvements in civic attitudes and engagement also have been found by other researchers, including an increased awareness of community concerns *(Astin & Sax; Giles & Braxton, 1997; Giles & Eyler, 1994)*, a greater sense of volunteerism *(Astin & Sax, 1999)*, increased sense of social and personal responsibility *(Giles & Eyler)*, awareness of stereotypes *(Hughes, et al, 2009)* and greater confidence in the ability to make a difference for others *(Schmidt, et al., 2004)*. Similar to our findings, other researchers have noted that service-learning students experience significant professional development, such as clarification of professional goals *(Hughes, et al., 2010)* and ability to apply theory to real world issues *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Markus, Howard, & King, et al., 1993)*.

While many sub-themes that emerged from focus groups in this study were consistent with findings from similar research, one sub-theme is unique; that is, students gained a greater sense of belonging at the University through participation in Campus Corps. Mentors resoundingly reported feeling a greater sense of social support in their personal, educational, and professional lives as a result of participating in Campus Corps. This finding is noteworthy because it has implications for academic persistence and retention—an important topic on university campuses. Students who feel as if they belong and matter to other students, faculty, staff, and the campus, in general, are more likely to feel satisfied at their current university and to re-enroll *(e.g., Harris., 2006)*.

We hypothesize that this greater sense of belonging results from the unique design of Campus Corps. First, because Campus Corps includes mentors from over 40 majors, students that would not typically have class together have the opportunity to interact with each other across departments, reinforcing their connection to the broader campus. Second, unlike many service-learning opportunities in which students leave campus to engage individually or in small groups with a particular community agency or

population, Campus Corps occurs on campus in a group setting. An intentional community is created by having mentor-mentee pairs meet in the same location at the same time to engage in meaningful activities together. Third, and perhaps most influential to the sense of belonging, the Mentor Family component of Campus Corps provides a built-in support system and place of belonging.

Rather than applying a traditional dyadic model of youth mentoring in which the mentor and mentee engage in activities in isolation, Mentor Families integrate each dyad in meaningful, enriched relationships with additional mentor-mentee pairs. As described above, Mentor Families are comprised of four mentor-mentee pairs, and are facilitated and supervised by a Mentor Coach, an experienced Mentor. These Mentor Families belong to a structured and intentional community, which is overseen by a Family Therapist Instructor. During an evening of Campus Corps, Mentor Families have their own space and spend a considerable amount of time together (e.g., going on a walk around campus, sharing a family-style meal and working on homework). As such, each mentor dyad is nested within a network of support beginning with the Mentor Family, and extending to a larger structured mentoring community.

By interacting with the other mentors and mentees within a Mentor Family, mentors have meaningful experiences with one another. They witness first-hand one another's successes and challenges in mentoring, and are able to elicit in-the-moment support from one another in mentoring the youth in their Mentor Family. Mentors within a Mentor Family also spend two hours per evening (the hour before youth arrive and the hour after youth depart) together, engaging in personal reflection and strategizing together how to make the biggest difference in the lives of the youth in their Mentor Families. As such, mentors learn to rely on one other for advice, encouragement, and companionship, thereby providing them with opportunities to develop close personal relationships. As reported by many focus group participants, these relationships often extend beyond Campus Corps and into the other aspects of students' lives, translating to a greater sense of social support and belonging at the University.

Implications

Because service learning experiences often ignite significant personal and professional growth in students, it is incumbent on faculty who teach service-learning courses to provide students with

the necessary supports and resources to fully realize the potential of this growth. Our experiences have taught us the importance of several types of support: (1) opportunities for reflection, (2) referrals to other services or communities on campus, and (3) continued opportunities to belong.

As has been noted by many service-learning scholars, intentional and effective reflection is an essential element of course success *(Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, et al., 2009)*. It is through reflection that students are able to make sense of and meaningfully integrate their service-learning experiences *(Bell, 1997)*. Additionally, reflection provides faculty with a window into students' experiences, allowing them to intervene, if necessary or desirable. For instance, in focus groups a few students indicated their experiences in Campus Corps had made them less confident in their ability to make a difference. If a student shares these perspectives as part of formal or informal reflection, a faculty member is provided an opportunity to explore how to best support this student in their service-learning role.

We have learned that a second type of support also is important; that is, referrals to other services or communities on campus. For instance, as students experience significant personal growth, they often benefit from referrals for counseling, leadership opportunities, or diversity and social justice outlets for involvement. Students experiencing notable professional development often benefit from referrals to appropriate services on campus that help them explore these new trajectories. Assuring that students are connected with advisors in different departments or career counselors at the campus career services center will be particularly helpful as they reflect on the application of course content, clarify professional goals and experience a deeper sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, as students exhibit valuable civic attitudes and engagement, faculty may want to connect them with resources that can facilitate further engagement in the community. Campus service-learning offices or community-based volunteer clearinghouses can provide students with the connections they need to make the next step as they further integrate service-learning into their lives.

Third, given the meaningful experience and sense of belonging that students often gained during Campus Corps, it is not surprising that they often sought ways to continue to be involved. We found many avenues for this continued involvement, which contributed to an even greater sense of community for students. Opportunities for continued involvement were: re-enrolling in the course to serve

as a mentor for another semester, enrolling in the course to serve as a Mentor Coach, serving as a research assistant on the project, serving as a teaching assistant for the Campus Corps course, conduct an honors thesis relevant to Campus Corps, or volunteering to lead activities or contribute in other ways.

Limitations

A few elements of this study limit the extent to which the study findings can be generalized to other populations and contexts. First, students' responses were self-reported and although the aim of this study was to capture their experience first-hand, direct observation of changes in mentors may add additional information to this research *(Hughes et al., 2010)*. Second, focus groups were conducted at the end of the semester in which students were involved in Campus Corps. Without follow-up data, it cannot be determined how long-lasting the changes that students reported will be. Third, the majority of the sample included White college students and thus, overgeneralizing these results to other populations is not recommended.

Next Steps

The results of this study have informed the researchers' subsequent design of a quantitative, quasi-experimental evaluation of the outcomes of participation in Campus Corps for student mentors. Decisions about the variables to measure in the quantitative study were informed by salient themes from these focus groups, such as mentors' civic attitudes, diversity awareness, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and community service self-efficacy. In this study, variables related to student retention, such as students' sense of belonging on campus and intention to re-enroll, also will be measured.

In the further future, the researchers plan to investigate characteristics of mentees or mentor-mentee matches that may contribute to greater benefits to mentors. Match variables may include age difference between mentors and mentees, the effect of similar at-risk backgrounds, and what difference a mentee's success in Campus Corps may have on a mentor's experience. The researchers also are interested in exploring the factors that contribute to service-learning students experiencing a loss in confidence in their ability to help others. While this tends to be a minority of students who experience this unintended consequence of service learning, discovering the factors that contribute to this phenomenon will help

practitioners strengthen teaching methods for these students. Additional research goals include the creation of a specific quantitative measure for capturing the mentor experience. Although measures exist to look at many components of the experience, no measure identified to date captures the experience of mentoring specifically. Finally, a longitudinal assessment is needed to evaluate the sustainability of outcomes experienced by mentors and future research will track student outcomes over time (e.g., 6-month intervals throughout their college career). This will allow the researchers to explore, for example, whether mentors' Campus Corps experience affects their graduation rates, career choice upon graduation, longer-term sense of civic responsibility, or future community involvement.

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