

8-2011

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EVALUATION OF MENTORING IN SOUTHERN NEVADA

PUA 791

UNIVERSITY NEVADA LAS VEGAS

SUBMITTED TO

DR. CHRISTOPHER STREAM

SUBMITTED BY

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AUGUST 15, 2011

ABSTRACT

The Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC) is charged with the issuance of grants and funding to groups who provide and run mentoring programs in Southern Nevada (which is primarily composed of Clark County.) The SNRPC desires to streamline and regiment this process, as currently it is operated with minimal oversight and regulation. We designed a survey to ascertain what mentoring groups in Clark County consider to be central to mentoring; both within and without their own programs. It is our desire that the SNRPC be able to administer the newly created survey to groups who receive and groups who desire the reception of funding. The results of those surveys will help the SNRPC develop criteria to gauge programs merit in regards to degree of qualification for funding.

Nevada ranks last in the percentage of 18 to 24 year olds who actually graduate high school (US Census, 2005). It was developments similar to those, which prompted the National Public Education Foundation (NVPEF) to set up a meeting of key leaders and stakeholders from Clark County and throughout southern Nevada. The initial 2004 meeting and subsequent meetings into 2005, led to the creation of the “Ready for Life” program.

The Ready for Life (RFL) concept was designed to assemble mentors and mentoring programs in an attempt to boost graduation rates in Nevada. This program was not to employ mentors or house mentoring programs, but to be the clearing house for mentoring programs in the valley. Ready for Life’s objective was to locate mentoring groups for their clients. RFL refers to their primary clientele as “disconnected youth.” Disconnected youth are described by RFL as youth 16 to 24 years of age, not in school and/or lacking a high school degree (or its equivalent), not working or connected to the legitimate labor market and not having strong connections to caring adults and community supports.

“Ready for Life participating organizations believe that as they partner together to understand and address, in a holistic way, the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of youth and families, students will be more likely to graduate from high school and gain appropriate post-secondary education or training to become productive, contributing members of society.” (nvpef.org, 2011)

The above paragraph, located on the Nevada Public Education Foundation’s webpage, describes RFL and is written to illustrate the impetus behind Ready for Life’s strong desire to support the implementation of mentoring programs. In 2007 this concept gained momentum by being officially adopted as the organizational framework for the newly formed regional Committee on Youth. This committee would fall under the control of the Southern Nevada

regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC) and as a division of the SNRPC; the regional Committee on Youth used Ready for Life's framework.

Under the auspices of the SNRPC, Ready for Life could now take advantage of funding, endorsements and the networking capabilities not previously available to the program during its infancy and prior to its connection to the SNRPC. However, due to the economic climate in Southern Nevada, RFL was unable to fully exercise their newly found capacities. The most recent activity of RFL was in 2008 at its Ready for Life Dropout Summit. Also due to that same economic strife, funding that may have been distributed by to mentoring groups by the SNRPC in the past has since ceased.

With little to no money available for distribution, the SNRPC is determined to make the most of any future funding that might come along and they are in need of a way to determine to whom and how the money should be allocated. Their need for an auditing procedure has not moved forward due to the lack of data to perform proper evaluations of mentoring programs in Southern Nevada.

After meeting with the representatives of the SNRPC, we decided that we needed to look at the future by thinking long term. It was at this time when our group realized the project should be broken down into a five step process consisting of: designing a survey, distributing the survey to mentoring programs or prospective mentoring programs in Southern Nevada, coding and analyzing the responses to the survey, developing a checklist of defined qualifiers and submitting the results, findings and recommendations.

After this deeper analysis we hit our first roadblock: time. Though the RFL group and University of Nevada at Las Vegas' M.P.A. program were well suited, ready, and happy to work with each other for a long time, our group was only signed on for a timeline equivalent to two

scholastic semesters. This short duration placed our backs against the wall and forced our collective hands; it was decided that our group would complete the first step of the five step process: the survey design.

When designing our survey, the questions were formulated to collect data that was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. In order to gain this type of data the survey we designed the survey to be “versatile, allowing the collection of both subjective and objective data through the use of open and closed format questions” (gatech.edu, 2011) Through researching survey design, we formulated the survey considering six basic points: clarity, the leading nature of the question, how the question is phrased, whether the question is embarrassing to answer, is the question leave room for a hypothetical response and whether the question promotes prestige or “feel good” bias. (gatech.edu, 2011)

First, we designed all the questions to be as clear as possible. Although we do not believe that a survey would intentionally be designed to be confusing; if the question is ambiguous the responses could be misinterpreted. Misinterpretation will allow for responses which are not related to each other or the topic which we are attempting to analyze. For example: our survey asks the question, “Does your organization require background checks for mentors?” When developing this question there was some debate as to whether we should add the “for mentors” element to the question. However, it was determined that if that element was absent, the question could be interpreted as “does your organization require background checks for those receiving mentoring.” Although this information might be useful in some way, it was not useful to the end we were trying to eventually reach.

Secondly, we sought to avoid leading questions. This was done by the use of open ended questions that required a thoughtful response. For example we ask the question, “What are the

benchmarks for effective mentoring?” If we were to make this a leading question that only allowed for predetermined and specific responses, we would not gain a true understanding of the thoughts of the organizations on a personal level; it is believed that they would simply choose the response that they saw as the highest in rank.

Third, we chose to phrase the questions in a way that would not contribute to positive or negative overtones that would lead to biased responses. Fortunately, the questions we are asking are personal to the agencies, so their responses will more likely be positive in nature when describing what their organizations do. However, we designed some questions to counteract that bias. For example we ask, “What must any mentoring program minimally provide?” The phrasing of this question does not ask the agency to speak only to their organization specifically, but must make broad assessments of mentoring as a whole. This allows the response auditor to evaluate the given response on a broader level.

Fourth, we designed the questions in a way that would not make the agencies feel embarrassed to answer. For example if we asked the question, “how effective is your mentoring program?” the agency might be too reluctant to answer the question honestly if they see their current program as ineffective. Instead we ask the question, “In what ways can local mentoring programs or mentoring programs in general be improved?” This allows the agency to answer the question uninhibited by their current mentoring practices.

In accordance with the fifth point, we sought to avoid hypothetical questions. Hypothetical questions could be described to be “based, at best, on conjecture and, at worst, on fantasy.” (gatech.edu, 2011) We ask the question, “What are the benchmarks for effective mentoring?” This forces the respondent to answer a question that they should be contemplating rather than a hypothetical question that would require them to embellish and fabricate an answer.

Although they could embellish on what they believe to be effective benchmarks, the question is grounded enough to require a response that is consistent with what they see as general practices in the field.

Finally, we looked to avoid “prestige bias.” This type of bias promotes an agency to answer a question in a way that would make them feel unnecessarily better about their current condition. We looked to design all of the questions to inhibit the proverbial “tooting of one’s own horn.” However, even when the question is worded carefully, if it is open ended, there is room for the agencies to aggrandize without being lead to do so.

The intention of this particular survey is better understand what is currently being done in mentoring programs across the valley. We also, through carefully worded questions, try to institute the ability to rate the programs that choose to complete the survey through their own personal descriptions of what a mentoring program should consist of and provide. The ultimate desire of our survey was to identify, evaluate and define “best practices” among the respondents to gain a better understanding of the scope of desired performance among mentoring programs in Southern Nevada.

Our survey is 18 questions spread over two pages and was developed to be coded and analyzed in thirds. The first third was to garner data about groups’ demographics, the next section aimed to determine programming practices, and the final third aimed to learn about the groups’ opinions and views on mentoring both within and without their organizations.

Questions one through nine of the survey were deliberately written to be answered with short responses that will allow the survey’s collectors and analyzers to code the responses. The questions ask about numbers, e.g. what ages of youth the group mentors, how many mentors the group has, or how long a group has been providing mentoring. Some of the other data acquired

from these first nine questions will be answered yes or no; i.e. are research and background checks required for mentors, and is certification a part of their mentoring program(s). Also learned will be the group's other sources of funding. The first nine questions seek answers that will give us the opportunity to furnish a quick snapshot of the group and eventually an brief statistical view of the particular agency.

The middle section, questions 10 through 13 is the programming section. These questions seek to identify what types of mentoring are currently being offered in the Las Vegas Valley, and what types of mentoring are desired in the future. These questions will not only help us gauge the meter of mentoring in Southern Nevada, but also understand the ambitions of programs and the limits of growth.

The final section of our survey is the thrust of the questionnaire, the information it gathers will be the driving force of mentoring criterion development. While only five questions, this third will gather qualitative responses that will shed light on each organization's idealistic views of mentoring. Instructions for this section asked respondents to: "Please answer the next questions honestly and in accordance with your organization's vision." The instructions were worded this way purposefully to guide respondents away from current programming and enable them to answer as they would like to see their programs if unhindered by fiscal constraints. We ask what must be done to ensure optimal production from a mentoring program shortly after we inquire what must minimally occur in any mentoring program. We also mix in queries about benchmarks, while raising a question about opinions on improving mentoring locally. The final question, we believe, is the most important on the survey: "If **YOUR** organization were to receive funding, what are your organizations immediate and long term goals?" This question was written without veiled wording or leading phrasing, it intends to learn exactly what it asks;

otherwise stated: we aim to learn exactly what this question asks to be told. Mentoring groups will answer, describing their plans for RFL funds. Responses will indicate if their group's plans are realistic or if the group's visions/goals are out of touch. In addition to allowing a group to vocalize broad opinions on mentoring in general, the third section is questions ask their respondents about their opinions with the secondary goal to gain a "ground level" perspective as they are the ones who are mentoring (or directing the programs.) This secondary motivator will furnish insight on how to better monitor and grade mentoring programs as the five step process continues after our scholarly endeavors have ceased.

At the culmination of the survey design and creation we have sent copies to the RFL and await communication on any potential additions or questions they might have. We anticipate a positive response to our efforts. The administration of the survey by future M.P.A. students will yield results that will provide the SNRPC with the information needed to properly distribute funds (when once again available.) The results will allow the SNRPC to establish a policy on what it is to be a legitimate mentoring program and establish criteria for doing so that will work within the SNRPC's overarching mission statement.

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