



BEST PRACTICES:

MENTORING NATIVE YOUTH



According to the U.S. Department of Education, the most at-risk population in the United States is American Indian/Alaskan Native youth (ages 15-24), who face serious disparities in a number of areas, including health, education, and safety.

Mentoring underserved and underrepresented youth has been identified as an effective, low-cost method of increasing self-esteem, providing positive role models, and discouraging anti-social behaviors.

The following are recommendations for mentoring programs and mentors that aim to increase access and visibility for Native youth.

Success Stories

Mentoring through Drumming

Greg McGhee is a tribal member, youth counselor, and mentor at the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians in Atmore, AL. Greg is also a drumming instructor. He teaches drumming to five male mentoring program Club members. They love learning about their culture while also learning about drumming. The Club members also enjoy the company and have a good time when they get together! Greg became involved with drumming when he was a kid. He always loved the sounds of drumming at the local powwow. When he got older, he joined the powwow club and began to drum. He enjoys teaching drumming because of the culture and history that is behind it. He wants youth to know their culture and heritage and what better way to learn than through drumming!



Fun in the Sun for Mentees and Mentors

The mentors and mentees of the Boys & Girls Club of Presque Isle in Presque Isle, ME participated in the Summer Environmental Practicum. Teens from the Rhode Island Narragansett Tribe and the five Maine Wabanaki Bands participated in a week full of activities learning about culture, the environment, nutrition, and physical activity. The event had presenters and offered youth a chance to make new friends. Activities included cultural lessons, traditional art, healthy meals, swimming, boating, and hiking. There were also presentations on Native culture and healing paths, career awareness, birch-bark art, traditional medicines, and water science lessons. Members of the Passamaquoddy Band brought a birch-bark canoe and they shared about the canoe's design and care elements. Everyone had a turn to paddle the canoe. Mentors and mentees had a wonderful week of fun while learning more about each other!

CHALLENGES

Mentoring programs and mentors should be aware of the unique experiences of the mentees they serve. They should be prepared to provide additional resources and training to mentors to meet the needs of Native youth.

Community engagement and involvement is essential. In many cases, tribal Elders can play a vital role in ensuring the success and continuation of effective programming.

PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Successful mentoring programs work to develop collaborative relationships across multiple sectors. When implementing mentoring programs for Native youth, it is important to involve caregivers, provide ample opportunities for training, and engage mentors, mentees, and relevant community members in meaningful experiences. The following are recommendations for leaders administering mentoring programs for Native youth:

When recruiting mentors:

- Expand the mentor screening process to address issues specific to serving Native youth. The screening process should determine a mentor's skill and comfort with the population served as well as his/her ability to respond appropriately to the challenges that come along with being a mentor.
- Consider the way each mentee's unique experiences might shape his or her expectations of a relationship with an adult mentor. Use this information to appropriately match a mentor's abilities and background with each mentee's needs.
- Establish clear expectations about the regularity and amount of contact that will occur between the mentor and youth. Consistency and long-term commitment from mentors are crucial to cultivating open and trusting relationships.

- Consider different kinds of people who could make good mentors:

- Tribal Council
- Elders
- Tribal employees
- Spiritual leaders
- Colleges & student athletes
- Civic, social and fraternal groups
- Senior citizen agencies
- Social workers and guidance counselors



What makes Native mentoring unique:

There are sometimes discrepancies between Native and non-Native approaches to mentoring. The comparison below can be referenced as a general overview of points of difference:

Non-Native Mentoring	Native Mentoring
Diagnostic listening	Listening for understanding
Focus on outcomes	Focus on the journey
Focus on the experts	Focus on inner wisdom
Focus on action	Focus on reflection

When training non-Native mentors:

Help non-Native mentors understand their own biases and views about Native cultures.

- Some mentors may find it helpful to prepare for cross-cultural exchange by beginning with a re-examination of their own cultures and values. This process can help mentors highlight their own formative experiences shaping their identities.

Provide training that, when appropriate, encourages mentors to include customs, traditions, and language among activities with mentees.

- Non-native mentors should be prepared to follow the lead of mentees when exploring Native customs, traditions, and languages.
- The ability to gauge each mentee's comfort level with these topics will be a useful and necessary role of mentors, as each mentee will have a unique connection and/or disconnection to his/her cultural background.

Cross-Cultural Communication

- Non-Native mentors should be educated on how to respectfully ask questions. Train mentors to feel comfortable admitting limited knowledge of Native cultures and inviting mentees to educate them about specific cultural protocols in their communities.
- Respectful questioning of the mentee can be appropriate IF the answers to the questions will somehow further the mentor/mentee relationship.
- If the mentor is simply curious about a particular aspect of the culture within which they are working, it may be best to advise the mentor to simply observe the practice without commenting, and perhaps they will learn more with time.
- Storytelling is an important part of many Native cultures, and may therefore be used to indirectly answer a question. Provide mentors with training that will help them appreciate storytelling as an effective method of communication.



Cultural Norms

The designation "Native culture" is misleading, as there are many diverse cultures represented among Native people. Mentors should be trained to respond to non-verbal communication that might be deemed atypical in non-Native society, while understanding that each mentee will be unique and his/her behavior may or may not be attributed to cultural background.

- Provide non-Native mentors with information regarding eye contact, handshakes, pauses/silences, and deference.
- Mentors should understand Native youth may be incorrectly perceived by their teachers or peers as shy and/or disengaged.
- Rather than indicating reservation, however, deference and lack of eye contact may be indications of respect or reflection.
- Help prepare mentors to handle issues such as residential mobility of the mentee and his/her family.
- Mentors should also have an understanding of how their role fits in with other support systems and family dynamics.

When matching mentors with mentees:

Involve all stakeholders as appropriate, including families, caregivers, parents, and grandparents.

- Many mentees will have more than one central caregiver, and may even spend significant time with relatives, extended family, and community members. These actors should be acknowledged and involved in the process when possible.

Establish clear expectations with mentors, mentees, families/caregivers, and parents regarding:

- How long the mentor/mentee relationship will last
- The frequency and duration of contacts and meetings for mentor/mentee pairs
- Typical mentor/mentee relationships
- Realistic results that mentors can expect to see



Provide a structured closure to the mentoring relationship.

- Whenever possible, avoid premature terminations. It is paramount that the relationships mentees have with mentors be healthy and positive throughout the entire mentoring relationship, including upon closure.

When applicable, develop a process that allows for the mentoring relationship to continue thriving after the official end of the mentorship.

- It is up to the discretion of caregivers to decide when it is in a mentee's best interest to discontinue the mentor/mentee relationship.

In order to retain mentors:

Mentor retention is crucial to the success of any mentoring initiative, as program effectiveness is dependent upon trust and consistency.

Training:

- Provide mentors with extensive training throughout the duration of the program, rather than solely at the beginning. As mentors spend time with mentees, new questions and challenges arise.
- The more prepared the mentor is, the less likely it is they will terminate the mentor relationship preemptively.

Support:

- Even with the most thorough training, mentors may still be surprised or frustrated by certain aspects of the mentor/mentee relationship.
- Provide immediate support when needed, and be open to changing a match if it is simply not working.
- Schedule weekly or bi-monthly meetings with mentors, and allow them to voice questions, concerns, or successes during this time.
- Encourage mentors to be resources for one another, and encourage more seasoned mentors to guide newer recruits.

Recognition:

- Encourage mentees to show gratitude towards mentors.
- Acknowledge mentors' service through local press, social media, etc.
- When possible, host meals and/or receptions for mentors so mentees can publicly thank mentors for their time.

Empowerment:

- Build a sense of belonging and community by asking for mentors' input regarding program logistics, implementation, and new ideas.
- Allow mentors to be involved, should they show interest, in multiple facets of the program.
- Invite mentors to be a part of other local events so they may cultivate deeper ties to the community, if those ties are not already established.

When closing a match:

Whether match closure happens as planned or preemptively, it is important to end the formal mentoring relationship thoughtfully and intentionally.

- Set a specific date for the final meeting. Make sure both the mentee and mentor are aware of this date far in advance.
- Speak separately with the mentee and mentor to wrap-up the program. Encourage constructive reflection, but be open to listening to any feedback.
- Help mentors understand why it is best not to promise mentees they will keep in touch.
- Be positive and supportive, regardless of how the match went.

Recommendations for mentors:

- Be consistent, patient, and flexible.
- Have realistic expectations about the challenges and obstacles faced by mentees and how those conditions may impact the mentor/mentee relationship.
- Set goals and hold mentees accountable. Express confidence in the mentee's ability to achieve these goals.
- Ask for help and support from program staff and other mentors when feeling overwhelmed or unsure about handling any aspect of the mentor/mentee relationship.

Featured Resources

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, www.mentoring.org

National Mentoring Resource Center, www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org

Additional Resources

SAMHSA. (2009, January). A Guide to Build Awareness: American Indian and Alaskan Native. <http://naptac.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SMA08-4354.pdf>

References

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