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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio Evaluation

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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio Evaluation: AmeriCorps Members and Project Mentors

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Introduction

This evaluation reviewed the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio (BBBSO) Project Mentor program, specifically the program's incorporation of AmeriCorps members as Project Coordinators during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. The evaluation was focused on answering the following questions:

1. Did the AmeriCorps members serve the target audience identified in the original grant application? If not, why not?
2. Were the AmeriCorps members utilized in the manner described in the original grant application? If not, how did the utilization of the members change from the original plan? Did these changes have a positive or negative impact on the program?
3. What problems were encountered in implementing the program? How were these problems resolved?
4. Were all planned activities implemented? Were they accomplished on schedule?
5. What costs were incurred? Did they exceed initial projections?
6. How did the AmeriCorps members impact the Project Mentor program?
7. What lessons/best practices have been learned to guide future implementation of this program?

Methods

The evaluation questions were addressed using a combination of quantitative data analysis, survey questionnaire analysis, and qualitative data analysis of interviews conducted with BBBSO staff.

References available upon request

Results

•Did the AmeriCorps members serve the target audience identified in the original grant application? If not, why not?

According to the original grant application, "Project Mentor is an initiative of Columbus City Schools (CCS) and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio to provide thousands of at-risk CCS students with valuable mentoring relationships..." the target audience of Project Mentor is students who are at-risk for dropout and delinquency. The most conclusive evidence that AmeriCorps members served their target audience can be found in the Project Mentor AmeriCorps Program Survey, conducted after the end of each service year, in which 100 percent of respondents answered that they directed students to additional resources (clothing, supplementary educational materials, food, transportation, etc.) to help them succeed.

•Were the AmeriCorps members utilized in the manner described in the original grant application? If not, how did the utilization of the members change from the original plan? Did these changes have a positive or negative impact on the program?

The original grant application states that AmeriCorps members were brought on to fulfill the role of Program Coordinators, AmeriCorps members were to be responsible for the day-to-day management of school-based programs. Based on the responses from the participants surveyed from the 2011-2012 school year, the AmeriCorps hires were utilized in the manner specific by the original grant application in a majority (but not all) of cases. Participants did not always become involved in all ten criteria of the original job description. Qualitative data collected from interviews emphasized that the AmeriCorps members added breadth and depth to the program's mission, making possible a greater number of individual matches. There were several changes made during the 2012-2013 year regarding the hires' responsibilities. Qualitative data revealed that from year one (2011-2012) to year two (2012-2013), AmeriCorps members' participation saw an overall shift from assistance-driven roles alongside BBBSO School-based managers to more leadership-driven roles. There was an unanimous consensus among the BBBSO leadership that the increase of AmeriCorps members' managerial responsibilities led to a strengthening of the quality of their contributions to Project Mentor.

•What problems were encountered in implementing the program? How were these problems resolved?

One problem that got frequent mention was poor member retention, especially during the 2011-2012 year. To resolve this problem second year recruitment efforts for Project Mentor focused on finding recruits who were dedicated to the BBBSO mission and could guarantee 1 month of service to Project Mentor. A second challenge was developing a training regimen that synchronized with the demands of the program. It was apparent after the training period for 2011-2012 that too much information had been delivered up front. For the 2012-2013 school year, then, the training process was refined and dispersed more evenly throughout the year. A third challenge was that some AmeriCorps members perceived themselves as separated from the Project Mentor "Chain of authority." Improvements to recruiting corrected this program during the 2012-2013 year. By locating a cohort that was more focused on the organizational mission, BBBSO staff were able to improve the collaborative environment of the AmeriCorps recruits.

•Were all planned activities implemented? Were they accomplished on schedule?

The Project Mentor AmeriCorps survey data analyzed in question #2 answers the first part of this question. All responses indicated that activities were implemented on time. Due to the nature of Project Mentor, a certain amount of improvisation is required to deliver the services required. This makes timeliness difficult to measure with exactitude. However, it is clear from interviewing BBBSO leaders that the pace of Project Mentor is hectic. The emphasis of the interviews did not indicate that the members' overall job performance was untimely. Rather, the emphasis seemed to be that the schedule is very demanding, and that not every need can be anticipated in advance.

•What costs were incurred? Did they exceed initial projections?

According to the original grant application, the overall costs of the Project Mentor prior to 2011-2012 totaled approximately \$1,500,000. However due to economic conditions, the budget for 2011-2012 was \$1,200,000. The original grant application further states \$350,000 was required to launch and support a 20-member AmeriCorps cohort for the 2011-2012 year. The Corporation for National and Community Support provided \$266,000 of that total and the remaining funds were to be appropriated from various BBBSO fundraising events. For the 2012-2013 year, the grant application indicates that funds were shifted to support increases in salaries and benefits. These costs appear to have been met with funds already allocated by the Corporation for National and Community Support, and were fulfilled by deciding not to purchase new computers for incoming AmeriCorps recruits. The budget projections for the 2013-2014 year suggest that funds available for the program will not exceed projections. Small adjustments to salaries, benefits, office supply expenses, and event costs have been made to keep the project going with a \$350,000 budget.

•How did the AmeriCorps members impact the Project Mentor program?

Qualitative data collected from BBBSO staff interviews proffer answers to this question. The Vice President of Programs for BBBSO said that AmeriCorps members added breadth and depth to the program, making more individual mentorship matches possible. Their supervisory support enabled the Project Mentor program to expand from 18 Columbus-area schools in 2011-2012 to 27 schools in 2012-2013. Another BBBSO staffer said that AmeriCorps members were "integral" to the success of Project Mentor, and that all programs under their leadership were successful. AmeriCorps members also helped refine the delivery of needed services to mentees.

•What lessons/best practices have been learned to guide future implementation of this program?

There was an unanimous consent among BBBSO staff that the training and preparation of AmeriCorps members for Project Mentor service has changed significantly in terms of best practices. These best practices include the need for ongoing training for job duties, timing for arrival, the need for AmeriCorps members to participate in the development of their training regimen, and the need for BBBSO to emphasize how Project Mentor benefits AmeriCorps members professionally by integrating professional development activities and reflections into the training process.

Evaluator's Conclusions

Current research points definitively to the conclusion that one-on-one mentorship programs benefit the mentee starting in the first year. Researchers pushing the latest discoveries in child theory endorse the idea of connecting children and adolescents with long-term mentorships, claiming that, "Multiple program evaluations have indicated that students with low socioeconomic status, experience with the criminal justice system, or poor academic performance benefit the most from long-term mentoring..."

BBBSO regularly evaluated its mentorship programs to encourage best practices locally and nationwide. These mentorship programs, of which BBBSO Project Mentor counts as one, require numerous behind-the-scenes players to make them successful. It would be naïve to assume that the mentor-mentee relationship is the only aspect of a mentorship program worth evaluating. With the incorporation of AmeriCorps recruits into its Project Mentor programs, BBBSO has taken a step toward trying to refine the administrative apparatus through which the mentor-to-mentee relationship gets delivered. This apparatus necessitates not only a targeted evaluation of its own, but it requires a specially tailored methodological approach as well.

It is the evaluator's opinion that the program has been successful to date and is committed to revising best practices year-to-year. Any decrease in the current budget of \$350,000 would be ill advised if BBBSO is going to be able to compete with the for-profit industry for enthusiastic young recruits. BBBSO should continue to emphasize to AmeriCorps recruits that Project Mentor is a worthwhile professional development opportunity for career both within and without the non-profit sector.