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STUDENT VOICES

We Built It, They Came, Now What?

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough

Al's Pals is a school-based mentoring program with the purpose of developing and fostering positive relationships between mentors (college volunteers) and mentees (elementary students). Al's Pals was developed in 2010 to meet two goals: 1) provide academic assistance and social development for at-risk elementary students and 2) encourage leadership development for college students through the potential for a) college mentors becoming student leaders, b) developing lesson plans, and c) leading enrichment activities (e.g., teaching Spanish, dance, music, and nutrition education to elementary students). The University of Alabama's Division of Student Affairs and Ferguson Center Student Union embraced these goals, and in fall 2010, decided to house the Al's Pals Program as a way to increase positive college student development while reaching out to the Tuscaloosa community.

Supported by national research (Laursen, 2002), Al's Pals provides meaningful relationships that are a powerful factor in promoting resilience, specifically for at-risk students. Of particular importance for young students, kindergarten through fifth grade, relationships with adults regulate development, specifically competence (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Students who have developed meaningful relationships with a caring, positive non-parental adult through mentoring have demonstrated improvements in social, emotional, and behavioral domains (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Additionally, mentees in school-based mentoring programs can experience improved perceptions of school through positive experiences in the after-school mentoring programs (Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Arbreton, & Pepper, 2000).

Al's Pals is a one-on-one mentoring program that pairs college volunteers with Tuscaloosa elementary students. When the program started in January 2011, Al's Pals had 65 mentors and 30

elementary students in the program. In less than three years, the program had expanded to over 550 volunteers per academic year and 180 elementary students enrolled in the program. Each college mentor volunteers approximately 30 hours each semester, resulting in a one-semester total of 10,500 hours. Student leaders who average 5 volunteer hours a week add another 3,400 hours.

The program is now offered at three sites in Tuscaloosa. Every volunteer goes to one of these sites each week and meets with his or her mentee. During their time together, they work on homework, lesson plans designed to complement the work they are doing in school, and one of the enrichment activities. One of the strengths of the partnership for university students is that students from a wide array of disciplines interact together. In a campus that can be divided into silos based on one's major or student organization membership, Al's Pals draws a diverse body of students, ranging from freshmen to graduate students, all coming together each week for a common purpose. They all want to serve and help elementary students learn. Through this common goal, many new friendships are formed that broaden students' cultural insight.

As a graduate student helping to coordinate the program, I am interested in how students become involved in community activities. A major question in my research is "How are universities involving community partners and how can college students better engage with community partners?" I have been specifically interested in Al's Pals mentors' interaction with children and community partners at the elementary schools and community center where the program takes place.

Nationally, many community-based organizations (and K-12 schools) are dissatisfied with the university-community partnership due to untrained college volunteers and a lack of commitment from them (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Knowing this information, I have focused on improving Al's Pals training and working on issues of volunteer commitment. We have made the following changes to address these national concerns mentioned in previous research on the topic:

Enhanced the development opportunities for student leaders. Student leaders are mentors that have been with the program for at least a year and are nominated, interviewed, and committed to taking a larger role in the organization. They have taken part and will continue to take a part in a more intensive training that covers not only the logistics of efficient and effective programming, but also discussions on privilege, goal setting, and the emotional and psychological benefits of having a mentor, or positive adult role model, in one's life.

Revamped the training for all mentors. Training has been revised to be more interactive and to include more relevant information to help volunteers succeed. For instance, mentors role-play common behavior scenarios in order to be prepared for situations in interacting with their mentees.

Required training of all volunteers, regardless of their start date. Although this solution seems obvious, with over 360 volunteers each semester, many starting after the original orientation date, program staff has had to be creative in making sure that every volunteer has the knowledge they need to be successful.

Requested a written commitment from all volunteers. Mentors are asked to sign a pledge, noting their commitment to the program and why that commitment is important to Al's Pals and to the community organization, but most importantly to the mentee.

Although these changes are a positive step towards strengthening our collaboration, I would argue that what we are doing is not enough. I want to deepen and enrich our community partnership so that college students can engage more effectively with community members. I have started by asking our community partners "What can we do better?" We have begun the process of gaining answers to this, and other questions by conducting focus groups with parents, teachers, current mentors, and more informally, youth in the program. If universities are trying to be helpful to communities, we need the on-going feedback of the people in those communities! We need to ask questions such as: What can we, as an organization, do better? What are we not doing well? What do

you wish we knew about your community? What training can we offer college volunteers to better understand your community?

Even though it is exciting to see Al's Pals growth by volunteer power, we see the need to offer classes for course credit that provide students an opportunity to reflect on their experience. These classes can provide students with a richer experience by understanding privilege and thinking about differences without reinforcing common stereotypes. These classes can help build leadership skills and provide an opportunity for a better understanding of the community being served by having students interview community members and dialogue with them about community needs. Moving forward, I have learned and continue to learn that community engagement is a dynamic process. The feedback provided affects how we move forward with Al's Pals. Community knowledge and expertise is essential in making Al's Pals successful for the elementary students, the schools we partner with, and college mentors who volunteer their time.

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About the Author

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough is a graduate assistant with the Al's Pals program. She has her master's in higher education and is pursuing her Ph.D. in social and cultural studies in the College of Education at the University of Alabama.