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Amy J. Anderson
*University of Illinois, Chicago*, amy.anderson2@unt.edu

April Riordan
aprilriordan@gmail.com

Lavasha Smith
lavashasmith@yahoo.com

Bridget Hillard
hilla028@umn.edu

Bernadette Sánchez
*University of Illinois at Chicago*, bsanchez@uic.edu

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# Cultural Humility Training for Mentors: Lessons Learned and Implications of Youth Programs

Amy J. Anderson
*University of Illinois Chicago*
*amy.anderson2@unt.edu*

April Riordan
*Independent consultant*
*aprilriordan@gmail.com*

Lavasha Smith
*Nexus Community Partners*
*lavashasmith@yahoo.com*

Bridget Hillard
*Vuyo Consulting, LLC*
*hilla028@umn.edu*

Bernadette Sánchez
*University of Illinois Chicago*
*bsanchez@uic.edu*

## Abstract

*The current paper presents lessons learned from a research-to-practice partnership between mentoring program practitioners and researchers that focused on the development and implementation of a cultural humility training for volunteer mentors. Using multiple data sources (e.g., training materials, field notes, mentor surveys), we present a description of the research-to-practice partnership and the Culturally Smart Relationships pilot training content. We generate practice-oriented lessons to inform future cultural humility training work with staff and volunteers in youth programs. Our lessons reflect recommendations that emerged from five project phases: (a) organizational commitment to justice, equity, diversity, inclusion; (b) training curriculum and logistical planning; (c) "To Zoom, or not to Zoom"; (d) facilitation of the training; and (e) post-training and ongoing support. The pilot training content and lessons learned have implications for youth programs by elucidating training as one component of a broader approach for equity in youth developmental program practice.*

Key words: cultural humility, youth mentoring, mentor training, research-to-practice partnerships

Mentoring program practitioners are charged by stakeholders with the task of meeting the needs of diverse youth by facilitating quality mentoring relationships with adult mentors. Similarly, researchers in academic settings aim to investigate mentoring programmatic processes and the role of mentoring on youth outcomes. Research-to-practice partnerships (RPP) are one way for mentoring practitioners and researchers to broadly address issues within the field of youth mentoring and development (McBeath et al., 2019). RPPs are defined as ongoing relationships between practitioners and researchers that are characteristic of mutuality and strategic partnership aimed at investigating problems of practice (Coburn et al., 2013). One type of RPP focuses on "design research" for real-world, concurrent development and evaluation of solutions to relevant practice issues (Coburn et al., 2013).

In this paper, we focus on lessons learned from one design based RPP between a team of mentoring practitioners and academic researchers. Our RPP sought to address the practice issue of developing and evaluating a training for volunteer mentors on cultural humility in the mentoring relationship. Developed by Tervalon & Murray-García (1998), cultural humility was initially conceptualized to contrast competency-based models of physician training in which goals were primarily static rather than understood to fluctuate across the lifespan. Cultural humility is defined to be a lifelong process of critically examining one's own worldview in relation to others and the power differentials that shape interactions with others and the community (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). In addition to health care, the concept has been applied within varying disciplines like education and social work (Foronda, 2019). In youth mentoring, cultural humility encompasses a mentor's understanding of social justice and power differentials in society that influence their worldview, their mentee's life, and their mentoring relationship (Anderson & Sánchez, 2022; Sánchez et al., 2014).

Mentor training is one piece of the theory of change in relationship-based interventions like Big Brothers Big Sisters (DuBois, 2020; Kok et al., 2020). Conceptual models of mentoring highlight that programmatic practices like mentor training at the beginning of the relationship, as well as ongoing support during the relationship (Weinberger, 2014), influence youth outcomes via relationship quality and duration (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014; Rhodes, 2005). Trained mentors may have greater understanding of mentoring attributes necessary to develop high-quality relationships, such as how to select youth-driven activities. Moreover, trained mentors may feel more confident in their abilities to handle challenges that arise in the relationship, which in turn may increase relationship duration (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014). Mentor cultural humility training may bolster a mentor's understanding to provide culturally relevant support, as well as better handle misunderstanding, which in turn may positively influence youth development.

Given the persisting resistance to anti-racism[1] among White Americans despite highly visible racial injustices in society (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020), youth programs must be critical of the racial (un)awareness held by mostly White volunteer mentors. Cultural humility is an essential attribute for program effectiveness because mentoring programs predominantly serve youth of color while enlisting support of mostly White volunteer mentors (Garringer et al., 2017). According to *The Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring,* which provides research-based guidance developed by researchers and practitioners, mentor training on race, ethnicity, and social identity is recommended because it can enhance mentoring program outcomes (MENTOR, 2015). Additionally, empirical research on mentor's cultural humility suggests that it can play a positive role in the relationship. For example, a mentor's ability to empathize with the experiences of different racial/ethnic groups was found to be positively associated with ethnic identity exploration among adolescent girls of color, regardless of the mentor's racial/ethnic identity (Peifer et al., 2016). Other evidence supports this finding, wherein mentor support for racial/ethnic identity was linked to greater ethnic identity exploration, but only for girls of color paired with a White mentor (Sánchez et al., 2019). By contrast, a mentor's lack of cultural awareness to power differences in the relationship can also harm the relationship trajectory (Spencer, 2007; Spencer et al., 2022). This research supports calls to action following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 to address the longstanding impact of racism in the field of youth development (for special issues, see Halgunseth et al., 2022; Kornbluh et al., 2021), including the need for anti-racism training within the field (Outley & Blyth, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2021).

Despite existing research and calls to action pointing to a need for mentor training, there are limited training resources available that are specific to cultural humility for volunteer mentors and have been rigorously evaluated. This RPP was formed to conduct a randomized pilot evaluation of a social justice and race equity training entitled, *Culturally Smart Relationships* (CSR). The purpose of this paper is to share lessons learned from the RPP focused on implementing a cultural humility training for adult mentors. We first describe the study and present an overview of the RPP and mentoring program. Next, we describe the pilot version of the CSR training curriculum, goals, and activities. Last, we present practice-oriented lessons that emerged during the CSR pilot.

[1] Anti-racism is the active process of supporting racial equality and identifying racist ideas within policies and institutions (Kendi, 2019).

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

The current paper is a part of a larger randomized pilot evaluation involving 99 volunteer mentors randomly assigned to a control condition with no training ($n$ = 50) or a training condition where they were invited to attend the CSR training ($n$ = 49). Of the mentors assigned to the training condition, 23 mentors ultimately attended a CSR training. Primary results from the randomized pilot evaluation comparing cultural humility outcomes between the two conditions are published elsewhere (Anderson & Sánchez, 2022). The current paper focuses on training implementation and feedback from the 23 training attendees ($M_{age}$ = 37 years old; Range = 24–63 years). There were 13 female and 10 male participants. Participants identified as White/European American ($n$ = 19), African American/Black ($n$ = 1) and Asian/Asian American ($n$ = 1), and one did not report their race/ethnicity.

Pilot study participants were recruited for the study via email, phone, or flier in the program's Facebook group. After joining the study and completing a baseline survey, participants were randomly assigned to either the training or control condition. If participants were assigned to the training condition, they received an email invitation with logistical information from staff to attend one of three scheduled upcoming in-person training sessions. The first in-person training took place in March 2020 ($n$ = 8 attendees) and the remaining two trainings were rescheduled to take place in April and May 2020 via Zoom ($n$ = 15 attendees). Participants were emailed a post-test survey to complete within 2 weeks of the training. Participants received $15 in Starbucks gift cards for participation in the research. A full description of study procedures is reported in Anderson & Sánchez (2022).

### *Data Sources and Analysis*

We rely on multiple data sources to describe the CSR pilot training and generate lessons learned. Data sources include archival training documents, field notes and memory from team members, and participant post-training surveys. On the post-training survey, the training attendees were asked to complete a 13-item consumer satisfaction questionnaire that included items about the timing, the facilitators' effectiveness, relevance of the training to mentors, the training content and goals, and overall satisfaction. Two open-ended questions were also reviewed to understand what attendees liked and what could be improved in the training.

## Research-Practice Partnership and Mentoring Program Context

The current RPP evolved over several years. The CSR training originated in 2007 from April's work at MENTOR Minnesota, where she created the CSR training and delivered it to several mentoring organizations. In 2008 at the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring at Portland State University, April and Bernadette, a psychology faculty and youth mentoring researcher, met and connected on shared interests in social justice, cultural humility, and mentor training. From 2018 to 2019, April, Bernadette, and Amy, a doctoral student at the time, began meeting to initiate a pilot evaluation of the CSR training at Big Brothers Big Sisters Twin Cities (BBBS-TC) where April was leading research and evaluation.

When the project was initiated in 2018, the mentoring organization served over 2,500 youth annually across multiple programs (e.g., community-based, school-based), facilitated mostly cross-race matches (78%), and served predominantly youth of color. By early 2020, mentors at the organization were recruited to participate in the pilot study. Lavasha, the president of the People of Color Indigenous Resource Collaborative at the agency, and Bridget, director of programming and training, joined the current RPP to support curriculum revisions and be trained as the two lead facilitators of the CSR training at BBBS-TC. Additionally, technical assistance from MENTOR Minnesota and support from outside research partner collaborators were garnered to support revisions to the training and evaluation materials.

Lavasha and Bridget facilitated three trainings (one in-person, two Zoom) in spring 2020, when there were significant sociopolitical events that influenced training implementation. Namely, shutdowns for the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the final two trainings to take place virtually and mentors stopped seeing their mentees in person at this time. Further, the third virtual training took place days after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police. There was significant public response in Minneapolis and nationwide during the training and post-training survey.

### *Training Program: Culturally Smart Relationships Pilot Training*

The pilot version of the CSR training was designed to be a one-time, 3-hour, in-person training and the revised Zoom version was 2.5 hours. It was aimed at mentors in the first few months of their mentoring relationship but was later opened up to mentors at any stage. Training content is reported in Table 1 and focused on three areas: (a) social identities, (b) the mentoring context and systems of power, and (c) having culturally smart conversations with mentees.

Table 1. Culturally Smart Relationship Pilot Training Goals, Objectives, Activities, and Discussion Questions

| Goals | Objectives | Activities | Discussion Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Mentors will increase awareness of their own and their mentees' social identities and how they impact their relationship. | • Understand that everyone has multiple social identities. (1.1)<br>• Reflect on their multiple social identities with an emphasis on their racial/ethnic identity. (1.2)<br>• Reflect on how social identities show up differently across contexts. (1.3) | • Silence Breakers in Conversations about Race [a]<br>• Social Identity Wheel [b] modified to mentoring<br>• Definitions of Social Identities [c] | • What social identities show up most and least often in your life and in your match?<br>• What social identities would you like to learn more about individually and in your match? |
| 2. Mentors will increase understanding of the systems of privilege and oppression that shape the mentoring relationship context. | • Understand how dominant identities are privileged and target identities are oppressed at multiple levels. (2.1)<br>• Reflect on how their social identities relate to privilege and oppression. (2.2)<br>• Identify points of connection and gaps in their knowledge about their mentee's social identities. (2.3)<br>• Grow our own individual learning so that we lift the education burden from our mentee. (2.4) | • Target and Agent Identities, and Forms of Oppression [d]<br>• Matrix of Social Identities and Statuses Activity Modified to Mentoring [e] | • What did you notice about the social group membership profile of your match (e.g., points of connection, gaps in knowledge, areas for future learning?)<br>• How might this affect your relationship? |

Table 1. (continued)

| Goals | Objectives | Activities | Discussion Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Mentors will increase readiness to have conversations with their mentees that acknowledge youth identity, assets, and context. | • Understand the components of a culturally smart relationship (3.1)<br>• Apply training knowledge to mentoring scenarios about social identity and context (3.2) | • Role play mentoring scenarios about race/ethnicity and cultural in the relationship | • How does identity and privilege show up in the scenarios and your reactions? |

*Note*. Table modified from Anderson & Sánchez (2022).

[a] Nailah & DiAngelo (2013)

[b] LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative (2017)

[c] Department of Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement (2014)

[d] University of Southern California (2021)

[e] Adams et al., (1997)

Introductory activities and framing were selected to make race central to reflection and discussion. This was important to emphasize because most of the mentors were White and racial privilege functions to shield White people from regularly thinking about their racial identity. The opening of the training introduced "Silence Breakers about Race" (Nailah & DiAngelo, 2013) to provide attendees with sentence starters to prompt participation and to combat perfectionism and silence, which are characteristic of White supremacy culture in organizations (Jones & Okun, 2001). Next, mentors reflected upon their multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender) with the Social Identity Wheel activity (LSA Inclusive Teaching, 2017). Then, mentors discussed in small groups how these identities affect their mentoring relationship with their mentee.

Guided by critical mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017), the second portion emphasized how privilege and oppression shape the mentoring context. Mentors discussed definitions of privilege and oppression and their influence on targeted and dominant social identity groups. Dominant social groups were defined as privileged from birth and can knowingly and unknowingly exploit or repair unfair advantages over members in targeted groups (Adams et al., 1997). Conversely, targeted social group members are discriminated against, marginalized, disenfranchised, oppressed, exploited by an oppressor and oppressor's system of institutions, and compartmentalized in defined roles (Adams et al., 1997). When discussing privilege and oppression, facilitators emphasized how it manifests knowingly and unknowingly, and the role of institutional systems that perpetuate these disparities.

Next, mentors learned about how various "isms" (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) impact privilege and the targeted social groups at individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels (University of Southern California, 2021). This aim was to draw attention beyond individual discrimination, and to reflect upon opportunity structures and societal messaging. Mentors completed a modified version of the Matrix of Social Identities and Statuses activity (Adams et al., 1997) to compare how their identities and their mentees' identities are impacted by privilege and oppression. Facilitators emphasized that these systems cause barriers for target groups, and that mentees and mentors may experience different distribution of resources (e.g., schools, housing) due to these systems.

Last, mentors learned about having culturally smart conversations, characteristic of three components: Pause, listen to learn, and affirm. This section was developed based on prior literature on adults' response to racial incidents (Gutierrez et al., 2017), such that adults working with youth should respond with questions and affirmation, rather than ignoring racial

issues that arise in conversations with young people. This portion of the training emphasized validating mentees' concerns about their lived experiences, rather than brushing them off or minimizing mentees' experiences. Mentors read mentoring scenarios focused on race/ethnicity (Lanza-Gregory et al., 2021) and role played how they would respond to their mentee. Mentors were given sentence starters to use when talking with their mentee and practiced how to identify when power shows up in the conversation.

### *Lessons Learned From the CSR Research-to-Practice Partnership*

In this section, we present lessons learned to inform practice around development and implementation of cultural humility training for volunteers or staff at youth organizations. Lessons are derived from our implementation of the CSR training, reviewing research literature on training, and reflections of improvements to the training. Lessons are organized within five phases of our RPP: (a) organizational commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; (b) training curriculum and logistical planning; (c) "To Zoom, or not to Zoom"; (d) facilitation of the training; and (e) post-training and ongoing support. Lessons about organizational values are presented first, and then others chronologically (order does not represent order of importance).

### *Organizational Commitment to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI)*

- Gain buy-in from organizational leadership to implement training and integrated program initiatives. BBBS Twin Cities made a commitment in their agency strategic plan to shift to a critical mentoring model, an approach to mentoring that emphasizes changing unjust systems in partnership with young people and their families. The change impacted all aspects of agency operations, not just programming, and having it part of a board-approved multi-year strategy helped overcome any resistance to the changes.
- Foster an integrated culture of JEDI rather than viewing training as one task from a checklist. Meta-analyses suggest that integrated diversity initiatives exhibit stronger outcomes than isolated, one-off training (Kalinoski et al., 2013).
- Examine internal JEDI needs at the organization in addition to volunteer training. Internal training among staff is a necessary component of an integrated strategy. That is, training aims to improve cultural humility in the internal interactions among staff and how staff interact with youth, mentors, and families.
- Determine program procedures for when volunteers are unwilling to engage in training. Programs with volunteer mentors may be reluctant to turn away volunteers who are unwilling to participate in cultural humility training (see community readiness

model, Oetting et al., 1995). Organizational procedures can be made for how these instances will be handled, and how other practices such as recruitment, onboarding, and integrated support may mitigate these instances.

- Keep equity values at the forefront given limited time of stand-alone training **and mentors' varied readiness.** Our limited 3-hour training block presented a tension of needing to balance what mentors ideally should learn and reflect upon for their mentoring relationship and what we realistically expected them to do based on their limited time, readiness for the topic (Oetting et al., 1995), and prior engagement with voluntary training opportunities.

### *Training Curriculum and Logistical Planning*

- Utilize a logic model to create the theory of change that includes training content, activities, and outcomes (Figure 1).
- Identify the best window of time for staff and volunteers to participate in the training. Prioritizing an introductory training on cultural humility before mentors work with youth mentees may help reduce potential harm in the relationship due to the adult's biases. Alternatively, mentor training is useful when volunteers are early in their relationships, but not so new to being a mentor that they don't have a frame of reference to implement skills learned from the training.
- Engage in iterative conversations about what content to include in training versus content to include in other parts of the integrated JEDI strategy. This pilot study included only a one-time training, so we balanced it with introductory topics that could be an "on-ramp" for future learning. Programs should have multiple areas (e.g., onboarding, ongoing support) for this content to be given to mentors.
- **Tailor training content to mentor's interactions with their mentee.** Although there are existing trainings that focus on cultural humility, it is necessary for mentor training to be tailored to youth–adult interactions. In this pilot, mentors practiced role playing scenarios about cultural humility issues that emerge in mentoring relationships. Looking back, the first two sections of the training could have been tailored further to implement in actual mentoring interactions.

Figure 1. Excerpt From Logic Model of CSR Pilot Study Theory of Change

| Culturally Smart Relationships (CSR) Pilot Training - Theory of Change | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Training objective | Training component | | | | | Training outcomes |
| Objective | Activity | Materials | Facilitator action | Mentor action | Time | Measure |
| Obj. 1.1<br>Obj. 1.2<br>Obj. 1.3 | Social identity activity (Who Am I?) | PowerPoint slide, Social Identity Wheel handout | • Defines "social identity" from slide<br>• Directs self-reflection about mentor's social identities<br>• Directs turn talk: mentors share which identities have the greatest effect on how others see them (1 minute each with a partner)<br>• Directs questions about how social identities relate to mentoring relationships. | • Complete handout for social identity definition<br>• Individual reflection on social identities (which identities do I think about the most, how does this change when I change contexts, etc.)<br>• Turn & talk with a partner (1 minute each) about which identities have the greatest effect on how mentees see them. | 30 min. | CSR Training content knowledge, modified from Multicultural Knowledge, Awareness, and Skills survey (D'Andrea et al., 1991) |

### *"To Zoom, or Not to Zoom"*

- In-person is preferred by some attendees. In open-ended feedback, virtual training attendees reported preference for in-person. For example, one participant reported in the post-training survey that they "understood why virtual was necessary (i.e., COVID-19) but would prefer being in-person."
- In-person training offers more opportunities for community building. Although uncomfortable at first, community building amongst in-person attendees appeared livelier as the training progressed, compared to Zoom training. According to facilitator notes, this was largely due to organic conversation amongst attendees between and during activities. By contrast, a virtual training attendee described in their post-training survey, ". . . having it via Zoom was difficult for fostering the same type of conversation I think would have emerged if we had been able to meet in person."
- In-person and virtual are both viable ways to reduce barriers to training. In the current pilot, virtual training reduced travel time for physical attendance and programmatic cost for food. However, virtual training introduces connectivity issues and at-home distractions. In conjunction with other research, both modalities might meet what is needed or desired in diverse volunteer training (Homan et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2020).

### *Facilitation of the Training*

- Consider the role of current sociopolitical events in training. The third virtual training in this pilot study took place in Minneapolis just days after George Floyd was murdered by police. This context was necessary to address at the beginning of the training and shaped the tone of the interactions among mentees. Specifically, the typical icebreaker (e.g., name one fun thing you do with your mentee) was modified. All training should consider what is currently happening in the community and nationwide as the context for the training and for the emotions attendees may be bringing with them into the training.
- Build training facilitator teams that have both mentoring and cultural humility facilitation experience. Facilitator teams of staff who are skilled in both cultural humility and supporting mentoring relationships are needed to weave together how cultural humility shows up in youth mentoring relationships. In the current pilot, the goal was to have a training team of at least two facilitators with diversity of racial and ethnic identity, prior training facilitation experience, and youth mentoring knowledge.

- Facilitator teams should represent diverse racial backgrounds. Training in this pilot was co-facilitated by teams of Black and White staff members. The diversity among co-facilitators was viewed as a way to complement each other's experiences, such that attendees not only heard from a Black facilitator who has lived experiences of racism, but also a White person grappling with their own racial privilege.
- Plan for and normalize discomfort as a natural part of cultural humility training. At the beginning of the CSR training, we were explicit in our framing and community guidance that cultural humility is a journey along which we are all at different places.
- Prepare to manage varying ranges of diversity among participants and openness to training content among mentors in the training. Facilitators should consider the potential diversity of attendees based on the organizational context. Namely, for White mentors the content might be new, but for mentors of color, much of the content is a lived experience, and it is unfair to place them in a teaching position to "benefit" White attendees' education. With regard to openness, we provided "Silence Breakers in Conversations about Race" to give attendees tools to work through resistance and uncertainty.
- Tailor community care and agreements to the in-person or virtual format. In-person training can utilize poster boards and quicker conversation to develop shared agreements for interaction. It is also necessary to use these strategies in virtual training, such as encouraging breaks or limiting distractions. While we did not experience issues, additional tasks are needed to prevent Zoom bombing (Duffy, 2020) and promote safety in breakout rooms (e.g., adding a facilitator).
- Maximize interaction among attendees, especially in virtual training. Post-training surveys indicated that mentors enjoyed small-group conversations, and attendees reported wanting more chances to talk with other mentors. We relied on breakout rooms and whole-group conversations; however, Zoom has limitations for one person speaking at a time or staying muted. Facilitators should enhance dialogue virtually by being aware of who is sharing and leveraging virtual features (e.g., whiteboards, chat; Cserti, 2021).

### *Post-Training and Need for Ongoing Support*

- Adults who need cultural humility training the most may choose not to attend. Review of research indicated limitations to the role of training on outcomes when voluntary training is compared to mandatory training (Carter et al., 2020; Kulik et al., 2007). To limit drops in attendance, programs should consider how to integrate

cultural humility training into their required practices (e.g., orientation, ongoing support).

- Provide attendees with tangible tools to utilize in their relationships after the training. Training attendees in the CSR pilot study received a document with resources for personal reflection (e.g., books, podcasts). Additional resources could include ideas for activities related to exploring their mentee's racial/ethnic identity or an article on supporting their mentee to cope with discrimination (e.g., Sánchez, 2017).
- Ongoing support for cultural humility development is needed following the training. Cultural humility is an ongoing process, and as such, post-training support is needed to help mentors transfer learnings into their mentoring behaviors (Roberson et al., 2009). This support can be used to help mentors remember and practice skills or troubleshoot barriers. Programs should leverage existing program structures to provide ongoing support beyond the training. Examples include emails, support groups for mentors and staff to talk about how they have applied training concepts to mentoring, or moderated discussion boards for mentors to check in, ask questions, and get advice.
- Leverage motivated mentors in training and ongoing support. We noticed during the CSR pilot that there was a subset of highly motivated mentors, as well as a desire amongst attendees to learn from other mentors. Programs may be able to leverage seasoned volunteers as sources of support in breakout rooms in virtual training, or support groups to share experiences with newer mentors.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to inform youth development program practice by providing an overview of the CSR training for volunteer mentors and lessons learned from a design focused RPP. Of the lessons presented here, the lessons about organizational commitment to JEDI through integrated strategies are foundational to implementing cultural humility training in youth programs. Namely, there are limitations to training volunteer populations, and training will not solve equity issues in youth programs. Although the current paper explicates the implementation of a one-time training for volunteer mentors to enhance cultural humility, we underscore the need for broader and integrated training and education in youth development programs (Kalinoski et al., 2013; Outley & Blyth, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2021). In conjunction with lessons focused on facilitation and logistical details, we emphasize the lessons that charge youth programs with the task of considering how training can be one component of a larger, organizationally backed training series that is inclusive of ongoing support for volunteers. Youth development programs must consider cultural humility and anti-racism at all levels of their

organization as necessary conditions for critical mentoring to address structural issues at the root of youth inequity (Outley & Blyth, 2020; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Cultural humility training for program adults reflects a singular but necessary component to addressing calls to anti-racist action in youth development.

## Author Note

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