GO-GIRL Response

by Enora Brown

The GO-GIRL Program is a unique project, characterized by its ability to bring together pivotal elements within a youth-intervention program and foster collaboration between university and local communities in large and moderate-size urban areas through service learning. Designed to bolster the social-skill development, educational outcomes, and possible career interests of poor middle-school girls of color in math and science, the GO-GIRL Program targets those early adolescent girls at a critical point in their development and provides an intervention in the context of a supportive mentoring relationship. As such, the project addresses a major issue of social concern—inequality along the dimensions of gender, race, and social class—that is manifest in "the girl problem": middle-school girls' declining interest and achievement in math and science (Campbell 1995; Hanson 2009).

The service learning model of the GO-GIRL Program incorporates the experiences for graduate and undergraduate students. This model is a part of the emergent shift in the historic relationship that has existed between academic institutions, as "researchers," and surrounding poor communities, as "the researched." While facilitating access to local communities, the model bridges the gap between theory and practice and enhances the knowledge base and *competencies* of both prospective teachers and academicians in the university, as well as the knowledge base and competencies of poor girls of color and poor white girls in the local community. In this sense, the GO-GIRL Program promotes bi-directional academic and social knowledge, an exchange *between* the university and the community rather than uni-directional information, in both form and in content, *for* the university *from* the community.

This commentary reflects on papers addressing GO-GIRL programs undertaken in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Bloomington, Illinois. Each paper describes the implementation of GO-GIRL in its local context and focuses on data related to the mentors' reflections

about the program and its impact on them. The programs have comparable key components: mentors' course work; reflective journaling; a range of mentor-mentee math-science activities including engineering, robotics, social science research, and nanotechnology; and connective activities between parents and the program. There is also one important *distinguishing feature* among the programs: the relative diversity of the mentors in relation to their mentees. That feature provides insights into the mentor-mentee relationship across varied contexts, into some of the programs' successes and challenges, and into future possibilities for intervention-program development. Of the five sites in the GO-GIRL Program nationwide, the Philadelphia, Chicago, and Bloomington programs illustrate the value of this mentoring program and garner lessons learned for future work in this important area.

First, the *GO-GIRL Program had an impact on the mentors*, which is a salient and valuable dimension of the program. It illustrates the bi-directional nature of this intervention, that is, its value for the youth as well as for the young women who were providing the services. It also reaffirms the importance of the ecological and relational contexts that frame the growth and development processes of youth, in particular those of African American girls. Across the sites, mentors reported numerous outstanding outcomes that capture the personal significance of their participation in a service learning project. Outcomes discussed by the mentors included a) their own growth, competence, and developing confidence as mentors; b) emergent decisions about their own career choices and their interest in and relative comfort with the fields of science and mathematics; c) their contributions as mentors to the lives of the middle-school girls; d) their enhanced awareness and understanding of sociocultural, economic, and other contextual factors that shape the lives of their mentees; and e) their increased understanding of themselves as young women. Those outcomes indicate the reciprocal nature of the relationships between mentor and mentee and of the program-intervention activities between the university and community.

Second, *the ease and significance of the relationships* that some mentors developed with the girls across ethnic and racial lines have been noted by Slaughter-Defoe and English-Clarke (2010) at the University of Pennsylvania. Relationships were valued, sought out, and cultivated by mentors and mentees and provided a context through which the learning and growth of the girls could occur. The power of relationships in the learning process is well grounded theoretically and empirically (Rogoff 2003). The significance of such

relationships deserves particular attention in conceptualizing, understanding, and implementing interventions with African American girls, as indicated in the work of Prudence Carter (2005), Annette Henry (1995), Joyce Stevens (2002), and others. Youth grow and develop in the context of proximal (e.g., interpersonal) and distal (e.g., societal) relationships, which help them navigate the multiply embedded contexts of their lives. In that sense, the mentor-mentee relationship of the GO-GIRL Program provides an interpersonal context for the girls' academic and social development, that is, a place to learn, raise questions, communicate, explore ideas, work together, experience guidance and support, and develop and share their competencies.

Third, the *quality of the personal relationship* between mentor and mentee is *most* important: the mentor and mentee are collaboratively able to counter factors that militate against the girls' interest and investment in studying math and science. In effect, their relationship counters or buffers each girl from the cumulative and current effects of unequal relationships in society that have pushed or placed girls, particularly working-class girls of color, outside or on the margins of competence or enjoyment in math and science as potential fields of study. The relationship also resists two well-documented effects of standards-based school reform (NCLB 2002) in the broader social context: high-stakes testing and school privatization (Orfield and Lee 2007; Ryan 2004; Street 2005). Education geared toward high-stakes testing deemphasizes the science curriculum and other bodies of knowledge not present on the test and privileges rote learning and lower-order thinking versus critical thought and higher-order thinking (McNeil 2000). The growing privatization of public education is resegregating schools and creating a greater disparity in the human and material resources (teachers and staff; books and equipment) available to students across racial and class lines. Both standardization and privatization militate against the masses of youth in poor communities of color, especially girls who could be exposed to or excelling in advanced mathematics and science. Though additional resources are required for the advanced study of science and math in an expanding culture of microtechnology, school reform is exacerbating inequality between high and low-income communities and shrinking the opportunity structure for the majority of youth. The mentor-mentee relationship counters those effects of national school reform by piquing girls' intellectual interests and encouraging their engagement with math and science as viable areas of inquiry.

Fourth, in this context, the GO-GIRL Program is *a crucial form of intervention* for African American girls. It cultivates new intellectual

interests—providing the necessary cultural and social capital to pursue foreclosed opportunities, expanding the options for future work and careers, and creating real, attainable goals that middle-school girls can consider in their next steps toward adulthood. In early adolescence, a pivotal juncture in development, youth are perusing their options, considering their aspirations, and identifying markers of their traversal to adulthood. It is at this juncture that the GO-GIRL Program incisively introduces new and exciting areas of study and related career possibilities in math and science and offers a broader range of life options that *may include* at some point *but are not limited to immediate* "motherhood." Joyce Ladner's (1971) early work on social factors that inhibit African American girls' aspirations and life options and Prudence Carter's (2005) recent work on successful supportive factors are instructive in this regard.

Fifth, GO-GIRL *faced common challenges* for intervention programs in low-income communities: participant attrition and discrepant values and views among participants arising from racial and class differences between middle-class university personnel and working-class youth. Explicit readings and self-reflective curricular experiences for the mentors can partly address those issues, which often pervade the relationships among "providers-as-outsiders" and "recipients-as-insiders." The issues may also be addressed by providing organized focal opportunities for adolescent girls to share their interest and curiosity in math and science. The girls' investment in the process can be intensified by probing their interests before program implementation and incorporating them into the service learning project. In addition, explicit readings and discussions with mentors can support them in examining their assumptions about youth whose socioeconomic and educational status, race, ethnicity, and language differ from their own. If mentors are able to understand and take the perspective of the middle-school girls across those lines of difference, they may be able to connect with the youth "where they are," enhance their ability to learn and grow together, and move the girls toward more promising educational, social, and career experiences in the near and distant future.

Finally, research has shown that *white educators and mentors construct racialized and class meanings* about the poor and about African American and Latino youth. Those meanings inform teacher expectations, perceptions about academic ability and "normal versus deviant" student behavior, and the referral and placement of youth in special education and delinquency programs (Ferguson 2001; Harry and Klinger 2005). As reported by Banks (2010) at Illinois Wesleyan, omissions by and insights gained from the predominantly

white mentors whose mentees were predominantly African American and Asian illustrate the relevance of those race and class issues. Similarly, mentors' revelatory perceptions of the girls' color preferences for mentors (Hunter 2005) and of the ethnic inclusion of Nkosi, a mentee from the Ivory Coast as reported by Slaughter-Defoe and English-Clarke (2010) at Penn, highlight the value of collecting mentor data and examining them to refine future program interventions. This commentary highlights the impact of three intervention programs for mentors and mentees; key insights about the power of relationships in learning; and the value of those interventions in fostering knowledge and career interests in math and science for African American girls in poor communities.

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