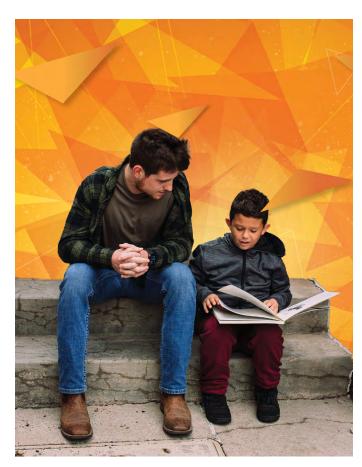# CONNECTING CRITICAL MENTORING &
THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE FOR MENTORING™

As noted in the title of this resource, this publication is a supplementary resource to MENTOR's long-standing program guidance document, *The Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*™. For over 20 years, the various iterations of that document (now in its 4th edition) have served as a starting point for community leaders and youth-serving professionals looking for basic guidance about how to develop and implement a volunteer mentoring program for young people. But as the mentoring field has evolved, so too have the program models and contexts in which youth experience mentoring, so it's vitally important that we provide additional recommendations to those who are going about their mentoring work in different ways. This is especially true when it comes to concepts like critical mentoring, where there are opportunities to offer mentoring in ways that are much more culturally responsive and relevant and that are focused on changing historically harmful mentoring approaches that do not effectively support youth and communities experiencing marginalization and oppression.

In the section that follows, we offer some key recommendations for practice that should support the development of strong, critically focused mentoring programs. We present these recommendations with loose alignment to the original *Elements of Effective Practice,* but want to note that there is no "right" way to run a mentoring program and that the recommendations offered here are only a starting point that should be augmented with the wisdom of local practitioners and leaders, the voices of young people, and the input of community stakeholders. We have also framed this around a *series of questions that practitioners should attempt to answer*, rather than dictating what those answers should be — an approach that we hope increases the inclusiveness and applicability of this resource. Elsewhere in this resource, we also provide a handy checklist of key practices so that program leaders can chart their progress in building out their critical mentoring model.

While called out specifically in a few places, the overarching question for practitioners as they think about the practice recommendations below is: **How can I put young people at the forefront of the design, implementation, and sustainability of this work?** Chances are there are many more opportunities for putting youth in the lead on these program elements than we have noted below.

1. DEFINING AND DESIGNING YOUR MODEL

Whether you are designing a brand-new program from scratch or shifting an existing program to take on a critical mentoring approach, the following tips can help you in making important decisions about how the program will function.

- **What youth needs are you hoping to address and what assets do youth and their families bring?** One of the great things about mentoring is that it can be deployed in service of almost any goal or aspect of youth development. But what will your program offer that other services and supports don't? The best approach here is to talk with youth and families and see what support would be most beneficial from their perspectives. A *participatory action* approach is often thought of as a way to conduct program evaluation, but it can also be very helpful on the front end of designing a program as it puts program recipients in the driver's seat and asks them, *"What do you want to achieve? What should this program help you accomplish? What would have meaning to you?"* Make sure that young people and their caregivers are the strongest voices in helping determine the focus and goals of the program.

- **How will mentors be positioned in relation to the many other supports in the lives of the young people served?** Ideally, a mentoring program is designed to offer young people additional guidance and support that affirms and goes beyond what is *already being provided* by family, friends, and other supportive adults. So, a good initial step in designing a program is to think about the webs of support that young people already have and how the mentors your program provides will fit into that "ecosystem." You may want to think about how mentors will engage with youths' families, peers, and institutional supports. What are your mentors bringing to that web of support and what program structures will help them work with those other supports in aligned ways?

- **What is our program's "theory of change"?** This is perhaps the most important step in designing an effective program model as it encourages you to think deeply about how the activities that mentors and youth will engage in will lead to the desired outcomes over time. For critical mentoring models, you may want to:

    - *Consider how the four aspects of critical consciousness* noted in the research section (critical reflection, group identification, critical motivation and self-efficacy, and critical action) will be developed and supported in the program. Ideally, program activities will contribute to one or more of those aspects, although there also may be a need for other activities, such as those that offer focused help on youths' areas of need (e.g., supporting homework completion) or that simply offer an opportunity for fun.

    - *Consider the sequencing of activities*, especially how you can move young people from critical reflection and dialogue to critical action that helps them facilitate positive change in the world around them. Be sure to remember that critical consciousness is an iterative process and young people may go through repeating series of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the issues that matter to them over time. Your role is to think about how you can use program activities to guide them through the process, increasingly building their consciousness over time.

    - *Think carefully about the pathways of personal growth and change*. A common mistake mentoring programs make is that they often focus on the ultimate goals they have for young people, but forget about all the smaller steps and changes that need to happen along the way. For example, if one of the goals of the program is to help youth experience more school success, programs often forget that to get there, they may have to build feelings of academic competence, or address negative school cultures or conflicts with teachers, or

overcome negative perceptions of the value of school itself. To use a metaphor, rather than trying to hit immediate "home runs", think about how your mentors and the activities they engage young people in can help hit a series of "singles" that move them along the bases toward that ultimate goal. Thinking about those smaller steps will help you design appropriate activities and offer them in the right sequence.

- o ***Determine the types of mentoring structures that make sense for your model.*** The research on critical consciousness building work with youth suggests that group approaches, or blended models where youth are paired with a mentor but work collaboratively across pairs, may be especially effective at spurring critical dialogue and action and collective identity. The dialogue component is vital, as it teaches that everyone has something to give as well as take — no one is an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the "All Knowing Teacher or Leader." A group approach also demonstrates, that collective action with a shared goal is essential to solve complex social problems. Ultimately, there is no "right" mentor-youth structure to do critical mentoring — in fact, some programs may choose to not formally match any mentors and youth and may adopt a more "free range" mentoring approach. There will also be considerations around how long the program lasts and how frequently mentors and youth will come together to do the work. Whatever you decide on, consider how the mentoring interactions can best be structured so that the activities of the program are meaningful and effective.

The most important aspect of designing a strong critical mentoring model is to remember that **this work is youth-led** and that they should be key informants in figuring out how this will best meet their needs. Never position mentoring as something done to them — a "not about me, without me" approach will ensure that they are the ones driving these planning stages. Make sure you have an answer to this question as you design the program: **How can I ensure that this program is what the youth in my community want and need?** This is often easier said than done, and it can be challenging for adults, especially those who come to helping professions with a desire to address youth needs, to cede power and control and center youth voice. But, done in it's ideal form, critical consciousness work is youth-led work as much as possible.

2. ASSETS SUPPORTING THE WORK

In addition to the broad program design aspects above, there are some behind-the-scenes things that program developers will also need to answer a few questions in the following categories:

- **Who do we need to partner with in the community?** Every mentoring program needs other community partners to provide additional services to youth and families and to help fulfill critical aspects of their mission. Which community organizations can help you fill in the gaps in your theory of change? What are the things that your mentoring program might not be able to provide help on directly? Knowing who your allies and like-minded partners are will help you provide more holistic support in service of your critical mentoring goals.

- **What kind of staffing do we need?** And specifically, what types of backgrounds, lived experiences, educations, and values will our staff need to have to do this critical mentoring work well? All mentoring programs need staff members to be aligned to their mission, but in critical mentoring work, given the intensive application of political, cultural, and ethical values inherent in the work, programs may need to be even more particular about who gets hired and the staff development that is provided over time. This applies not only to "frontline" staff, but also to program leadership and board members. Doing this work well likely requires diverse representation and a collective understanding of what strong critical consciousness building work with youth looks like.

- **Who can fund this work in authentic ways?** This might be a challenging question for programs, as critical mentoring work is inherently about challenging systemic issues and questioning the status quo within a community and its institutions. Many of those institutions might actually be existing supporters of mentoring efforts in a community. But critical mentoring is not an approach that is transactionally *in service of* the institutions that represent existing power structures in a community, even those who may provide financial support for mentoring. This work is about supporting youth and families and not accepting a status quo that harms members of a community. And that shift in the funder-program relationship — the idea that their financial support of young people does not preclude criticism of themselves or their systems by those young people — can be a very challenging one for some funders. Regardless of who financially supports your work, there is a need to ensure that they believe in the mission and philosophy and that they can allow the program to work independently and support youth in taking critical action.

3. IMPLEMENTING YOUR VISION

Here we focus on the six common standards of practice articulated in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*. In each of these common program implementation areas there are likely to be some nuances that critical mentoring programs need to consider carefully.

Finding and Welcoming Participants

Youth and Families

- How will we make our program goals and philosophy clear to youth and families both in terms of marketing materials and during initial orientations and community presentations? How can we find the young people who best fit our vision and make them aware of the opportunity?
- How can we refer youth and their families to other service providers locally if they are not a good fit for what we are offering?
- How can we make caregivers aware of the role we want them to play in this work? How can we bring them in and make them feel included?
- How can we empower youth to recruit their peers to the program? What would our word-of-mouth strategy look like?
- What's the maximum number of youth we can serve well? And how do we handle it if the demand outpaces our capacity?

Mentors

- What are the motivations and mindsets we are looking for in our volunteer mentors?
- What kinds of lived experience, education, or backgrounds will be helpful in doing this critical mentoring work? Are teaching, advocacy, or similar backgrounds a requirement?
- What other skills should mentors bring? What would be helpful in terms of participating in the structure and format of our mentoring sessions? (E.g., if offering a group model, is experience collaborating with other teachers/mentors or supervising groups of youth a priority?)

Program Participation and Safety

- How will we ensure that youth (and caregivers) and mentors commit to the expectations for program participation that we set? Are there certain levels of participation that we will require?

- How will we assess our mentors' . . .
    - ability to engage in critical conversations/dialogue? What kinds of role-play scenarios or other opportunities to demonstrate their ability to do this work well can we provide?
    - safety for working around young people? Will we conduct background or reference checks? If so, what kinds of criteria might we consider disqualifying?

- How can we involve youth in interviewing/vetting prospective mentors?

Preparation and Teaching of Youth and Mentors

- What kind of preparation will youth and caregivers need? How can we best prepare them to be in leadership roles within the program? How can we encourage them to use mentors as tools in their own development?

- For mentors, what kind of training do we need to offer to make sure that they . . .

- o have a strong collective understanding of the program philosophy and how to engage in the activities of the program?
- o know how to handle certain situations (both crises and smaller challenges) that will come up?
- o can work effectively with each other to deliver consistent messages to our youth?
- o know how to support critical action and build our young people to use their voices and power?
- o understand key concepts like intersectionality and honoring diversity, which may not always come naturally based on lived experience?

- How long does our pre-match training need to be? What would it take to reasonably cover the content where we need everyone to be on the same page?

- How often, and on what topics, might we want to offer ongoing training?

- How can we utilize program alumni in designing and delivering training?

- Would there be value in having mentors and youth go through trainings together to create transparency and shared accountability around this work?

Forming Relationships Between Youth and Mentors

- Will we match youth with individual mentors, create mentoring groups, or have adult-youth interactions be more open in an unmatched format? Or a combination of these approaches? What is our rationale for these choices in relation to our theory of change?

- How will youth have a voice in the process of being matched with their mentor(s)? What does their input look like?

- If we are not creating mentoring "matches," how can staff ensure the full engagement of all youth so that none "slip through the cracks" and get a watered-down experience? How can we ensure consistent mentoring for youth if we implement an unmatched model? How can staff share information so that the entire staff and our mentors are able to effectively support youth they may see sporadically?

- If we are choosing a group approach, what criteria do we have around the formation of groups? How can we ensure good group dynamics?

- Is there a need for project-based grouping based on interests or needs? For example, if several young people want to focus on a specific community issue or all use similar skills to take action, what structures can we provide that subset of our mentees?

Supporting Mentoring Relationships

- How can we be prepared to support our mentees in moments of crisis? What are the types of crises or trauma that our youth may experience? And how can we be prepared to offer timely support and nurture their resilient responses?

- What types of support will youth need as they transition from critical understanding into critical motivation and action? Are there limits to the action we are comfortable with them taking? What assets/resources can we bring to the action they'd like to take? Are there planning tools we can offer that can move them from thinking to action?

- How can we ensure that every young person in our program has the experience with

our services they need? What structures do we need to have in place to check in with youth regularly and spur their engagement?

- How can we handle situations in which young people or mentors are not participating as intended? What problem-solving structures might we create so that we can address issues as they arise? How can we shift gears if they tell us this is not working?

- When young people and mentors take critical action, how can we debrief these experiences in ways that leave young people feeling empowered and heard? What are the critical actions we as staff take as young people do their end of "the work"?

- How do we celebrate the success of the young people in our program? Whether it's individual achievement or a successful group action, what structures do we have to ensure that the growth and accomplishment of our mentoring family is honored?

Transitioning Mentoring Relationships

- What does "goodbye" look like in our program? What steps do we take when one young person prematurely leaves their group or the program as a whole? What steps do we take to process that closure?

- What steps do we take to close down the program cycle or "year"? Are there ceremonies or rituals that would bring special meaning to the process?

- How do we involve caregivers, and even the broader community, in celebrating the end of a program cycle? How can these events build connections to alumni and spread word about the good work we are doing?

- What are our policies regarding mentors/staff and youth having contact after their involvement in our program? How can we allow for ongoing support of alumni? How can we make involvement in the "family" we create a long-term asset for young people?

4. YOUTH AND MENTORS EXAMINING THE DIFFERENCE THE PROGRAM IS MAKING

As noted elsewhere in this resource, research on mentoring has often discounted or ignored forms of mentoring that offer more critically based perspectives and practices. There is a tremendous opportunity, therefore, in front of those who are doing strong critical mentoring work to conduct well-designed evaluations that can contribute in new ways to the research literature on youth mentoring. By doing so we can expand our understanding of effective mentoring and will highlight new ways the mentoring movement can be much more responsive to groups experiencing marginalization and oppression. Research, done well, can build on these communities' traditions, practices, ways of knowing, and values to teach others how to better meet the needs of young people.

- **How can young people lead your evaluation efforts?** If you used a participatory action approach in program design, involving young people in your evaluation work will be easier! Ideally, they will be the ones to design and execute evaluation tasks that will tell you whether all this was worth it and how it can be improved. Even if you didn't start with Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) principles during the program design phase, you can still give young people and caregivers a primary role in evaluating the program after it's been running for some time. Your mentees can help you with . . .

- figuring out how to measure their growth as individuals.
- how to tell the story of their work in the program, especially the things they are proud of or feel reflect themselves as individuals.
- what to report to stakeholders, such as caregivers, funders, and peers, as well as how to tell that story.
- ensuring that your evaluation activities treat them as participants with agency and authority, not simply as "subjects" to be studied.

It is worth noting that, just like participatory program design, Y-PAR can be challenging to implement in reality, even with the best of intentions. It can be time-consuming, labor-intensive, and can highlight issues related to power and voice. But there are established models for doing this work, such as empowerment evaluation, that can help you in figuring out how this will work in your context and help center youth and community voice.

- **What story do you want to tell about your work?** You may choose to focus on different aspects of your operations in an evaluation. For example, if a critical mentoring approach is a new one for your program, you may want to focus on a "process" or implementation evaluation that examines how well you delivered the program and what participants thought about the experience. If you have been doing critical mentoring approaches for a while, perhaps focusing more closely on the achievements of young people will help illustrate how the critical support you offer is working to make both individual- and community-level impacts.

- **How will you tie this back to your theory of change?** To bring this full circle, you started this program for a reason — what outcomes would show that you've hit the mark in service of the young people in your program? Your theory of change likely identified some steps that move young people toward their goals. How can you measure those steps? How can you demonstrate that your mentors are, in part, what's moving them along that positive pathway? While critical mentoring strategies can be used to support *any* personal development or achievement outcome, critically focused mentoring programs might want to focus on evaluation strategies that help tell the story around:

  - Development of critical consciousness (reflection, motivation, action)
  - Identity development
  - Sense of belonging and future expectations
  - Personal achievements (e.g., education, career, family)
  - Values, beliefs, sense of purpose
  - Feelings of self-confidence and efficacy
  - Leadership skills, including social and emotional learning
  - Civic engagement and social justice orientation

There are likely many other key practices and decision points that go into running an effective mentoring program that uses a critical lens on the work. But the questions posed in this section should help any leader looking to offer their community a critical mentoring model that is youth-led and true to the social justice principles inherent in this work. As your program evolves over time, share your key practices with others in the field so that we can build our collective knowledge on this topic together.