

Fostering Positive Outcomes for At-Risk Youth: Developing a Standard Operating Procedures Manual Outline for the STRIVE Mentoring Program

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Abstract

Success Through Relationship, Investment, Versatility and Empowerment (STRIVE) is a student-run mentorship program offered through the UNC Asheville Key Center. STRIVE matches UNC Asheville students with at-risk youth living in the Hillcrest Housing Development who attend the Hillcrest Enrichment Center afterschool program. Mentors meet weekly with 25-35 elementary school children and provide developmental activities ranging from art and music to career exploration. The goal of this project, creating a standard operating procedures manual for STRIVE, is to provide a resource for future UNC Asheville students working with STRIVE so that the program can be effectively sustained after the current leadership graduates. The manual, which will be constructed in outline form, will consist of questions, materials, and operating procedures, and will incorporate such topics as ethics, program timeline, time management needs, areas of mentoring, educational resources, and methods for measuring impact or outcomes. The Key Center director will complete the manual in the spring of 2016, potentially expanding the mentorship program into other community organizations. Consistent with research findings, I have observed the importance and positive impact of developmental activities on elementary school children. The STRIVE manual outline will provide keys steps to ensure the completion of the manual so that the mentorship program continues to provide positive outcomes for both current and future students in the Hillcrest Enrichment Program.

Key Words: STRIVE, Mentoring Program, Standard Operating Procedures Manual, UNC Asheville Key Center, and Hillcrest Enrichment Center

Background/Origins of the Project

The Adelaide Worth Daniels Key Center for Community Citizenship & Service-Learning (Key Center) on the UNC Asheville campus works to connect students, faculty, staff and community partners in meaningful relationships. The Key Center, in partnership with Multicultural Student Programs at UNC Asheville and OpenDoors of Asheville, welcomed an AmeriCorps Vista member on board to “create mutually beneficial, long term sustainable projects centered on improving educational and behavioral outcomes for low-achieving students in elementary, middle, and high schools in the Asheville area” (Jess-Mara Jordan, personal communication, October 14, 2015). Jess-Mara Jordan’s VISTA project goal was the development of a mentoring program called Success Through Relationship, Investment, Versatility and Empowerment (STRIVE).

STRIVE officially began when nine prospective mentors attended their first orientation on October 12, 2013, after being selected by a student panel under Multicultural Student Programs. Between October 2013 and February 2014, three more mentors were welcomed to the team. The first mentor-mentee meetup was on February 5, 2014, with 12 mentors and 11 mentees. Mentees traveled from Asheville Middle School and several Asheville Elementary Schools to the UNC Asheville campus once a week for 10 weeks to participate in activities.

STRIVE Mentoring Program is extracurricular focused, and mentors create enrichment and developmental activities using music and art, and plan special outings that are fun and educational. Consideration of the importance of the activities they bring to the mentees helps to create a more beneficial experience during and after the activity (McGuire & Gamble, 2006). Healthy snacks are also provided by the STRIVE mentoring program.

Transporting the mentees to the UNC Asheville campus each week during the first year was a daunting task; due to communication issues and time constraints, this initial structure was not sustainable. With the help of OpenDoors’ connection with Mrs. Lillian Butler of the Hillcrest Enrichment Program, STRIVE was able to transition into a permanent space in its second year of operation, beginning in the Spring 2015 semester. Instead of working to coordinate getting the mentees to the UNC Asheville campus each week, mentors now travel to the Hillcrest Community Center and meet with 20-25 students in the Hillcrest Enrichment Program.

The shift into the Hillcrest Enrichment Program in Spring 2015 was a wonderful transition and has given STRIVE a firm foundation on which to build. By creating environments in which students feel engaged and connected, STRIVE increases their interest in learning and decreases their experimentation in high-risk behaviors (Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004). The children STRIVE currently serves are in an existing after-school program. Mentors know how many children (mentees) to plan for when developing activities and snacks, and the mentees look forward to seeing their mentors and participating every single week. The Hillcrest Enrichment Center has a full-service kitchen and with access to this kitchen, mentors are now able to create healthy snacks for their mentees that often tie into their activities every week. Mentees are brought on campus a few times each semester to expose them to campus life and encourage them to aspire to become a Bulldog someday. Spring 2015 mentees were brought on

campus to see master drummer Bolokada Conde and to attend the Crossfire All-Star Basketball Game featuring NCAA champion, Quinn Cook.

Goals of after-school programs range from providing supervision and reliable, safe childcare for youth during the after-school hours, to alleviating many of society's ills, including crime, the academic achievement gap, substance use, and other behavioral problems and academic shortcomings, particularly for racial/ethnic minority groups and low income students (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015). The Hillcrest Enrichment Program went through changes over the 2015 summer in order to address several of the issues listed above, and began serving more children in their after-school program. The changes did not affect how STRIVE operates within the Hillcrest Enrichment Program, but they allow STRIVE more flexibility in creativity and promote growth within STRIVE, allowing room to recruit more mentors. STRIVE currently serves 25-38 elementary and middle school mentees. (This variation is due to the fact that Hall Fletcher Elementary is a year-round school and has some weeks in which approximately 10 children are not in the program because their school is not in session).

The purpose of the STRIVE mentoring program is to create mentor relationships between UNC Asheville students and the Hillcrest Enrichment Center and Asheville City School students. Children living in low-income housing, such as Hillcrest, report improvement in grades and achievement test scores associated with academically oriented after-school programs like STRIVE (Posner & Vandell, 1994). STRIVE mentors seek success for their mentees by creating meaningful relationships with them, making mentees feel that they are authentically invested in them, and catering to the variety of passions of mentees by offering versatile activities. They empower mentees to not only have input in the activities they participate in, but also to take control over reaching their goals. The hope for STRIVE is that it will expand into other local communities as well as work specifically in the Hillcrest Enrichment Center Program and the Asheville City Schools system. However, STRIVE leadership will ensure they have established sustainable relationships with the mentees and communities they currently work with before each expansion effort.

Fall 2015 is the first semester that STRIVE is operating without its founder, Jess-Mara Jordan. Jess-Mara's AmeriCorps Vista term ended during the summer and she moved on to graduate school in Greensboro. During this transition, the interim director of the Key Center, Ashley Heger, realized that several lead mentors in the STRIVE program will be graduating soon and wanted to ensure that this program is not terminated after those graduations. It was determined that a standard operating policy and procedures manual was needed to ensure the program's sustainability and the possibility of expansion.

In early August, 2015, I met with Ashley and shared with her that I was looking for a project to complete for my community engaged scholar distinction. Ashley asked if I would be willing to create a manual for STRIVE. Because I have worked with STRIVE for the past few semesters and was a leading mentor in the program, completing a manual to ensure that our work continues was ideal. Due to time constraints and my upcoming graduation, we decided I would create the

outline of a manual this fall; it will be completed during the Spring 2016 semester by the interim director of the Key Center and STRIVE's program coordinator, Grace King.

Methods and Work Undertaken

I began my research by determining the key components needed to ensure STRIVE's sustainability into the future. I worked closely with Hillcrest Enrichment Center's Program Coordinator, Lillian Butler, to ensure that the services STRIVE mentors are currently providing are something she wants continued into the far future. I also worked with the Key Center's interim director, Ashley Heger, to determine aspects of the program that should be highlighted in the manual.

A standard operating policy and procedures manual for STRIVE will provide governance and guidance to future leaders and mentors in the rendering of the STRIVE's services. One goal of creating a standard operating policy and procedures manual outline is to reduce the time spent in the revision process; the finished manual should, therefore, come across in a clear and logical order. Although the UNC Asheville Key Center already has written policies and procedures in place, STRIVE needs a manual that specifically addresses its purpose, policies, and procedures. Administration of qualitative written policies and procedures will contribute to the continued stability and safety of STRIVE and allows STRIVE's program administrators to address key components for sustaining this program in the future.

Six key components have been identified for the successful sustainability of STRIVE: documentation of STRIVE's vision and operating principles, clear guidelines for administering the program, addressing risk management, consistent operations despite turnover of key personnel, blueprint for replication and expansion, and a baseline for continued improvement. These components are key to the sustainability of STRIVE for the following reasons:

1. Documenting STRIVE's vision and operating principles in a standard operating policy and procedures manual provides future administrators, program directors, mentors, mentees, parents and community partners with a clear statement of the program's mission, values, and vision and provides the framework that defines the operating principles and processes of STRIVE.
2. Clear program guidelines for administering STRIVE increases sustainability and expansion. Providing detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to administer STRIVE clearly defines staff roles, agency expectations, and routine operating guidelines.
3. Addressing risk management issues in a standard operating policy and procedures manual will provide clear and explicit instructions on how STRIVE is to be administered by eliminating uncertainties concerning how to effectively, consistently, and safely run STRIVE.
4. Documenting consistent operations will prevent STRIVE from losing critical program knowledge when key personnel graduate. Clearly detailing and defining policies will

minimize program disruption in the event of staff changes. A standard operating policy and procedures manual will also assist in training new personnel and mentors.

5. A standard operating policy and procedures manual serves as a blueprint, providing a consistent model for replication of STRIVE and future expansion of the STRIVE program. By creating a blueprint, STRIVE also enhances its ability to apply for grants and expand locally.
6. A standard operating policy and procedures manual serves as a baseline for continuous improvement, forcing STRIVE to examine the services it provides and be honest about the structure of current program practices. The manual will also provide STRIVE with a solid foundation that allows for continual improvement and refinement of the program.

As the current travel coordinator for STRIVE, I am very involved with the managerial duties involved with running day-to-day operations of the program. Fall 2015 marked considerable change for STRIVE as the founder is no longer leading and the policies at UNC Asheville have changed markedly. Some of the changes include:

- Approval of potential mentors from the UNC Asheville Title IX office
- Risk Management workshops
- Completion of weekly written objectives for activities
- Weekly wrap-up reflections to summarize the activities and the children's responses
- Post-tests for mentees after a significant project activity to determine engagement and knowledge acquired

These changes have been well received by the mentors and leaders, and will aid in pushing STRIVE into a bright future.

Through research on the UNC Asheville Library's resource page, I discovered the National Mentoring Partnership (mentoring.org), which provided access to a "Generic Policy and Procedures Manual" for mentoring programs (Ballasy, Fullop, & Garringer, 2007). This resource offered a step-by-step guide to building a manual for an existing program, and contained all the basic elements that Ashley and I talked about during our initial meeting; it will serve as a baseline for organizing the manual outline.

I began by compiling information about the actual physical work done by mentors and administrators and organizing it into a format that anyone could use to replicate the program successfully. Once it was determined which portions of the program worked for STRIVE and have been instrumental in its success, I was able to organize the outline into three sections based on the Ballasy et al. (2007) resource:

Section I. Organizational Background: Provides a clear picture of STRIVE's and the Key Center's history, mission, vision, structure, and documents, allowing those who work with STRIVE to get an overall sense of STRIVE and the Key Center and to better comprehend how mentoring fits into the framework of the Key Center.

Section II. Program Policies: Define what is acceptable and ensure effective and consistent program operations. Policies also reduce unnecessary risk, safeguard STRIVE’s mentors and mentees, and increase program success; they are instrumental in achieving goals and developing program practices that are mandatory and non-negotiable. The policies for STRIVE will be approved and monitored by the Key Center Director and will correspond with the policies of the Key Center.

Section III. Program Procedures: Describe the implementation and management of operational functions and the step-by-step process necessary to implement policies and practices. Program procedures are governed by STRIVE’s student program coordinator and Key Center director, and outline who is to carry out specific tasks and when those tasks are to be completed. Qualitative procedures for all program activities enhances program effectiveness, longevity, and risk management. Brief, detailed procedures provide consistent guidance and direction for staff, mentors and community partners, and mirror program policies while outlining the basic steps and sequence of each program activity.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

The most difficult challenge faced during the working phrase of this project was time management. The final semester of school before graduation is packed with projects for senior seminar, internships, work, mentoring, and assignments for other classes. Once I organized my schedule and put all assignments, activities, and events on a calendar, I was able to work effectively on this project as well as on others.

The next challenge came when I discovered the National Mentoring Center. Their generic guide to creating a mentoring manual simplified my process for organizing the manual for STRIVE. However, the generic manual had so many policy and procedure guides and samples, it was difficult to determine what aspects STRIVE could take away from the generic manual and use to its benefit. Since resiliencies among at-risk youth of lower family socioeconomic status who participate in mentoring programs show gains in internal and external assets,” (Thompson, Corsello, McReynolds, & Conklin-Powers, 2013), it is important that STRIVE continues to be an instrumental part of the Hillcrest Community. As a mentor in the STRIVE program since its conception and the current travel coordinator, I was able to look back over what we had done in years past and talk with my community advisor, the Key Center director, and STRIVE’s current program coordinator to determine where STRIVE wanted to go in its future. I was able to streamline the generic manual outline and design it specifically for STRIVE’s current needs and also have components that can be added later if and when future STRIVE leaders decide to expand.

Project Outcomes & Sustainability

Policies and procedures represent the sum total of the decisions, requirements, and activities needed to run an organization effectively (Ballasy et al., 2007). Without a formal set of guidelines to ensure consistency among student mentors, STRIVE would have no foundation on which to stand, increases its risk of ending when the remaining student mentors that helped organize and build its reputation graduate in 2017. This manual outline builds a solid foundation for the standard operating policy and procedures manual that will be completed in the spring of 2016. It will be a frame of reference that will ensure the sustainability of STRIVE.

Studies have shown that children who attend formal after-school programs are exposed to more learning opportunities than children in other forms of after-school care, and they spend more time in academic activities and in enrichment lessons, and less time watching TV (Posner & Vandell, 1994). STRIVE is a positive influence and key component in the success of the mentees it serves. Children who are engaged in enriching youth programs demonstrate more personal characteristics associated with healthy development, such as initiative, positive identity, helping others, valuing diversity, and educational and occupational success (Heinze, Hernandez, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010). STRIVE mentors develop activities that aid children in critical thinking and self-awareness.

The results of this project yielded a manual outline that classifies STRIVE's operations into two categories: policies and procedures. Policies focus on major operational issue and are non-negotiable and change infrequently. They are expressed in terms of requirements and explain what STRIVE does in its operations and why STRIVE operates in said manner, and they are set by the Key Center Director. Procedures are more narrowly focused and open to change and continuous improvement. They contain detailed descriptions of the activities, desired objectives, and processes, and explain how and when STRIVE operates, who performs specific duties, and sometimes, what those duties entail. Procedures are managed by the STRIVE program coordinator and travel coordinator.

The completed outline includes three sections:

Section I. Organizational Background: Organizational Information, Organizational Structure, and Organizational Documents.

Section II. Program Policies

- **Recruitment Policy:** Provides direction regarding the development, implementation, and review of the mentor recruitment plan; indicates how the recruitment plan is managed; defines the roles and responsibilities of Key Center and STRIVE in accomplishing these activities; and ensures that effective recruitment of mentors is a well-managed and continuous process. Recruitment policies are vital to obtaining mentors.
- **Inquiry Policy:** Provides STRIVE staff with direction on how to handle inquiries from potential mentors and community partners, including what initial information to provide them. This ensures that STRIVE staff and mentors provide excellent customer service to

potential mentors and community partners, and serves as an early screening tool for potential mentors who wish to continue in the process of becoming a mentor.

- **Eligibility Policy:** Defines the preferred criteria necessary for a candidate to become a mentor in STRIVE, including eligibility requirements and a comprehensive set of criteria that potential mentors must meet for initial and continued participation in STRIVE. This helps STRIVE better accomplish its goals, reduces risk, and ensures greater consistency.
- **Screening Policy:** Establishes non-negotiable requirements all applicants must complete prior to being approved for participation in STRIVE; provides clear requirements of STRIVE staff for screening potential mentors; states the steps required in the mentor screening procedure; and stipulates who is authorized to make the final decision about acceptance of mentors to STRIVE. This gives guidance about any additional approvals and screening steps required before accepting applicants.
- **Recognition Policy:** Provides direction about the recognition efforts that should be undertaken, when, and by whom, reinforcing that mentors are vital to the success of STRIVE.
- **Record-Keeping Policy:** Defines who is responsible for keeping records of mentor applications; describes the type of filing system used to maintain and update these records and how to document and store records of the screening process; outlines how and when information is to be destroyed. This policy reduces program liability by ensuring all information is treated consistently and kept confidential, and increases program effectiveness by providing a system for efficiently tracking applicants and monitoring mentors.
- **Confidentiality Policy:** States what information must be kept confidential, who can access confidential information, how information will be used for the purposes of STRIVE, how it will be kept confidential, and the limits of this confidentiality. Confidentiality is an important part of risk management.
- **Transportation Policy:** States whether or not it is permissible for mentors to transport mentees within the community, and if permitted, what criteria must be met by the mentor. This policy minimizes program risk by providing mentors with clear direction concerning the rules and requirements for transporting mentees in the community.
- **Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect Policy:** Defines what constitutes child abuse and neglect, mandates staff training in this area, and provides instruction to staff on how to report a case of suspected child abuse and neglect. This policy is an important part of STRIVE's risk management.
- **Use of Alcohol, Drugs, Tobacco, and Firearms Policy:** Defines whether or not STRIVE permits the use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or firearms while mentors are engaged in STRIVE activities and/or events. This policy also minimizes program risks while reflecting STRIVE's values and promoting a healthy and safe environment.

- Unacceptable Behavior Policy: Defines behaviors that are deemed inappropriate and unacceptable by mentors while participating in STRIVE, and helps ensure the safety and well-being of all mentors, mentees, and community partners.
- Closure Policy: Provides guidelines concerning what circumstances lead to ending a mentoring partnership and how to proceed when closure is necessary, addresses the issues of future contact beyond the formal partnership duration, and clearly stipulates the limits of liability beyond partnership closure.
- Evaluation Policy: Provides guidelines for measuring effectiveness, information that can improve STRIVE's services; requires that STRIVE leadership engage in formal evaluation procedures of mentors and program operations.

Section III. Program Procedures

- Recruitment Procedure: Provides direction and focus for recruitment, defines how STRIVE recruits mentors, includes a written recruitment plan and mentor job description, describe the process for monitoring the results of STRIVE's effectiveness.
- Inquiry Procedure: Ensures all potential mentors and community partners are responded to promptly and in a friendly manner, and gives clear instructions on how to answer inquiries and respond to them.
- Mentor Screening Procedure: Includes specific eligibility criteria, mandates the use of proper screening and assessment tools, and describes how records are kept. Screening applicants allows the STRIVE program coordinator and the Key Center director to make an informed decision about the appropriateness of a candidate for STRIVE, significantly minimizing risk.
- Training Procedure: Provides STRIVE mentors with clear direction concerning the contents of training and how and when it is to be delivered to participants. Having a formal training outline and materials strengthens STRIVE by consistently preparing mentors and community partners for the partnership.
- Recognition Procedure: Defines the ways in which STRIVE recognizes and rewards mentors and mentees, increases mentor and mentee satisfaction, and motivates mentors to continue with the program until graduation. Recognition procedures provide staff with direction on how to recognize the efforts and accomplishments of mentors and mentees.
- Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect Procedure: Determines the steps required to comply with North Carolina Law. All staff, agency representatives, and mentors must fully understand what constitutes child abuse and neglect in North Carolina and how they are obligated to report it.
- Closure Procedure: Outlines the process that the program coordinator should follow for ending a partnership with a community partner and potential circumstances for closure; lists the steps needed to effectively make it a smooth transition for everyone, especially the youth.

- Evaluation Procedure: Establishes measurable criteria, employing a solid evaluation design and undertaking objective data collection. Ensures STRIVE is on track in meeting its goals and mission.

Ties to Academia

As a student striving to be a psychologist, I must be versatile and able to relate to all people, no matter their age, gender, race, or culture. I chose psychology as a major because I wanted to work with teens transitioning out of foster care, and in order to work effectively with this population I would need to have an understanding of how people's thoughts and feelings affect their behavior. Studies have shown that four out of every 10 boys who bullied others as children had three or more convictions by the time they turned 24 years of age (Troubled Kids, 2015). STRIVE mentors stress a bully free zone and work with children on positively redirecting their anger. Respect and appreciation of others can be a powerful first step toward addressing critical health problems, including the problem of youth violence in urban communities (O'Donnell, Stueve, San Doval, Duran, Atnafou, Haber, & ... Piessens, 1999). Psychology has taught me to effectively deal with the emotions, thought, behaviors, and personalities of myself and others, and has given me the tools needed to be an effective STRIVE mentor and reduce inappropriate behaviors from the mentees.

In creating this manual outline I had to work with several individuals as well as mentor the youth who will benefit from the creation of a manual. This real-world experience allowed me the privilege of creating an outline that is thoughtful and logical. Working with the youth at the Hillcrest Enrichment Center allowed me to use the tools I gained in my two and a half years at UNC Asheville to listen effectively, be attentive of emotions, and deal rationally in difficult situations.

My first service-learning course was Astronomy Outreach, where I learned to create outline and lesson plans. The goal of the course was teaching seventh grade girls about astronomy. I presented in two classes about the solar system and how to find constellations, and the history of NASA. This class taught me presentation skills and how to deliver information to adolescents in a manner that captures and retains their attention.

My second service-learning course was Crafting Community with Teens, where I learned how to create a collage and then effectively teach the same techniques to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders at Erwin Middle School. This class taught me a skill and how to teach that skill to teens. In this class I learned that everyone can create art and how to help teens bring out their best selves through art.

My last service-learning class was Aging, Health, and Active Living, where I was a student coach in the Wellness Activities for Successful Aging (WASA) Program. I learned how to create a workout plan and meal plan for a senior in the program. I also learned how to listen effectively and really hear what the senior I was assigned desired to get out of the program.

Being able to work with different age groups and provide them with beneficial services directly relates to my area of academic study. Each of these courses has aided in my success as the travel coordinator for STRIVE and in working with the mentees in the program. Creating this manual outline required me to gather all the knowledge I acquired from my courses and my time mentoring in STRIVE, and then record this information in clear and logical wording that can be used by anyone. It also required me to study methods of ensuring the safety of the mentors in STRIVE and the mentees that we service at Hillcrest. Simply writing down rules and regulation would not guarantee that STRIVE will be a working program 10 years from now. However, an in-depth manual of how STRIVE operates allows replication of the program and aids in its sustainability.

Conclusion

The Hillcrest Enrichment Program Coordinator has been pleased with STRIVE and wishes to continue receiving quality service. Involvement in after-school supervised and organized activities is associated with positive outcomes, while participation in unsupervised and/or unstructured contexts during this time is related to less favorable adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). Early adolescence is a time when youth begin to engage in identity exploration. Evidence from qualitative studies also illustrates the potential benefits of organized activities to facilitate identity development and personal exploration (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). The children in the STRIVE program enjoy learning and appreciate the flexibility of the mentors to embrace change and provide guidance to help them in their development. STRIVE has earned the trust of the community because it built a reputation of yielding confident, caring, empathetic, and competent mentors willing to work at the pace of those it serves.

I attribute the ability to take real-life experiences and put them in readable format to the writing intensive courses required as a part of obtaining a psychology degree. This manual outline will allow key personnel to complete a standard operating policy and procedures manual for the STRIVE Mentoring Program that will govern its operations. The final manual will be a point of reference that will be used for years to come and will aid future students on how to replicate the work each semester. The goal is to provide future students with a guide that has everything needed to continue providing the quality service that current STRIVE mentors provide to mentees in the current program. It will also streamline many of the processes that must be done by the student program and travel coordinators, ensuring that they are able to work effectively behind the scenes as well as on the front lines mentoring.

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