

TACKLING THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION CRISIS: OLDER ADULTS MENTORING THE NEXT GENERATION



A city of just over 200,000, Rochester, N.Y., anchors a six county metropolitan area with 1.1 million people. Like other American communities surrounded by relatively affluent suburbs, the inner city today confronts many of the difficulties faced by former industrial centers. At 46 percent, the Rochester City School District high school graduation rate is among the lowest in the nation. Among the city's African American youth, only nine percent of students entering ninth grade earn high school diplomas.

In 2005, with mounting concern about declining academic achievement, Rochester's mayor created a task force to plan a community-wide response to shore up the educational system. A growing body of research was showing that strong, nurturing relationships with adult role models can make the difference in helping youth navigate adolescence and successfully reach the milestone of high school graduation. Drawing on this evidence, the task force named mentoring as a central strategy of their plan for improving academic achievement.

Years later, Rochester's mentoring effort was still struggling to gain traction. The Rochester Area Community Foundation began considering how they could best support the call for mentors. The city already had several mentoring programs, and it didn't make sense to create something new. Rochester's mentoring organizations had effective programs to train and match mentors with youth, but they struggled to meet demand that far exceeded supply. Above all, what was needed was a way to increase the pool of mentoring talent.

Around the same time, the Foundation began prioritizing aging as a new focus area for their investment in the community. Although some people initially thought about the issue of aging with a traditional lens—thinking about “seniors” as frail, elderly people in need of support—it quickly became apparent that Rochester's baby boomer generation had a great deal to give. Older adults are potentially ideal candidates to be mentors: They bring a lifetime of professional and parenting experience, many have available time, and a significant number are looking for ways to use their talents to help improve their communities. Following a community assessment that confirmed older adults were concerned about youth achievement, the Foundation officially launched Boomer Mentors. With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies' Community Experience Partnership, Boomer Mentors became one of nine community initiatives across the country dedicated to tapping older adults as a high-impact resource for achieving important community-level change.

AT-A-GLANCE

ROCHESTER'S BOOMER MENTORS INITIATIVE

COMMUNITY ISSUE

Increasing high school graduation through mentoring

COLLABORATORS

Rochester Area Community Foundation
Rochester Mentors
Lifespan of Greater Rochester
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Rochester
Community Place of Greater Rochester
Compeer Rochester
City of Rochester
Monroe County Office for the Aging
Monroe County Youth Bureau
Rochester City School District
United Way of Greater Rochester
Ad Council of Rochester

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Rochester, New York
Total population = 211,000
(metro area = 1.1 million)
50+ population = 53,000 (25%)

RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

120+ volunteers supporting mentoring
20,000+ hours of service (valued at more than \$500,000)
\$720,000 raised to support the program
\$700,000+ in donated media

“Older adults don’t only work on older adult issues. That’s not the only thing they’re experts on... In mentoring, I know that matches with older adults last longer than ones with younger folks.” — Jeff Newland, Rochester Mentors

Building on Existing Expertise

Although the Foundation had a long history of funding efforts to support youth academic achievement, mentoring was a new strategy for them. Early on, they identified two key partners who had the knowledge and practical experience to design an initiative that would bring older adults into mentoring. Lifespan of Greater Rochester was the region’s largest service provider for older adults, and they offered significant experience recruiting and placing older adults in volunteer opportunities. Rochester Mentors, a network of local mentoring agencies, brought direct access to, and credibility within, the mentoring community, as well as the first-hand knowledge of how to create successful mentorship matches. In addition, the Foundation deliberately cast a wide net and invited diverse stakeholders, including city leaders, educators, service providers, and older adult community members, to help plan the initiative.

The Foundation acted as a convener and facilitator. “We put on the coffee, set the table, and had folks come and start working toward a vision,” says Patricia Campbell, senior program officer. “The expertise of the folks who knew mentoring was highly valued, and those of us in the aging community and at the Community Foundation didn’t pretend to have a strong voice in that aspect of [the work]. Yet when it came to the aging side, that was what we knew and brought. There was a real understanding of what each of us brought to the table, and what we didn’t bring.”

The planners formed three working groups, each focused on a key aspect of the project’s success: alignment, recruitment, and sustainability. The focus on alignment reflected a philosophy that, rather than creating something new, Boomer Mentors could bring greatest value by building on and strengthening existing mentoring resources. The alignment team was tasked with creating a strategy to link older adults with existing mentoring programs. They also worked on building the capacity of mentoring programs to engage and retain older adult volunteers once they had been matched. Meanwhile, the recruitment workgroup designed an ambitious outreach effort to attract older adults to the mentorship opportunity. Lastly, the sustainability team looked for ways to ensure older adult mentoring would live on as a continuing strategy past the three-year period during which funding had been committed.

Connecting Older Adults to the Right Mentorship Opportunity

At the heart of the Boomer Mentors effort was a major marketing campaign to build awareness among older adults and recruit them to the mentoring work. Through a partnership with the Ad Council of Rochester, the project secured more than \$700,000 in donated print and broadcast media—television ads, videos, billboards, and radio, as well as local news coverage. Although not explicitly branded a “boomer” or “older adult” initiative,

the campaign was shaped so it would appeal to older adults. Lifespan leveraged their many years of experience working with older adult volunteers to develop messaging and imaging that would attract the boomer demographic, using the tag line, “You have what it takes to be a mentor.” The planning team chose to brand Rochester Mentors as the face of the initiative, rather than Boomer Mentors, to invest in something that would live beyond the three-year anticipated life of the Boomer Mentors project.

As the campaign generated interest, Rochester Mentors held information sessions to provide additional information: What is mentoring? Is mentoring right for me? Built as an orientation, the meetings invited participants to answer questions about the challenges young people face today, the role of a mentor, and what they would have to offer as mentors. The process outlined a defined, evidence-based framework for how to mentor successfully, and helped participants recognize how their skills and interests could bring value. Prospective volunteers also learned about the range of potential placements, which included different age ranges, populations, and time commitments, and they could choose to work with a mentoring program that aligned with their own needs and interests. Jeffrey Newland, the founding president of Rochester Mentors, devoted time to understand what ignited each prospective volunteer’s passion. He knew each of the collaborating mentoring groups and suggested appropriate matches.

The participating organizations were not asked to change the way they had been running existing programs, but were offered technical support to help them meet standards for safe and effective mentoring, and to help them learn how to work more successfully with older adult volunteers. “People come to mentoring for a relationship,” notes one of the participating partners, “so they need to be met at the door with a relationship, not a process.” The initiative provided regular trainings and convened collaborators monthly to learn from each other, sharing effective, evidence-based practices from mentoring models in use locally as well as nationally.

Persistence and Flexibility Are Essential

To many, mentoring sounds like an easy fix. In practice, however, it takes great effort to do it right. There is mounting evidence that failed mentoring relationships can do more damage than good. It is a strategy that demands long-term commitment and follow-through. Studies suggest that the minimum commitment a mentor must make is to work with a youth at least two times a month, at least four hours per month, and for a minimum of one year. Consistency is essential.

One measure that mentoring initiatives frequently track is “conversion rate”: the percentage of people who inquire about volunteering as mentors who actually become mentors. The requirements of successful mentoring create very high expectations for prospective volunteers, leading to relatively low conversion rates. In Rochester, for example, of more than 500 inquiries from people who thought they wanted to become mentors during the three-year Boomer Mentors project, fewer than one in four “converted.”

The fact that so many interested volunteers were falling by the wayside led Rochester Mentors' Jeff Newland to an important realization: The opportunity that mattered most was not finding people to fulfill one particular job—mentor—but to engage people in the bigger cause, and to help them feel passion and excitement about that cause. Although the requirements for successful mentoring had to remain relatively standardized, the Boomer Mentors project began finding other roles for people who wanted to support mentoring as a strategy even though they were not able to make the commitment as mentors themselves. By being responsive and flexible, the initiative grew a larger community of supporters than they would have if they'd simply turned people away who didn't "fit" the program model.

A new group—Potential Connections—began meeting monthly to facilitate thinking and discussion about how older adults could support mentoring or other approaches to improve youth academic achievement. It provided a forum for adults to reflect on their skills and passions, and to develop aspirations for applying their talents to benefit their community. Although Potential Connections originally was not a component of the Boomer Mentors model, it helped the initiative in unplanned ways. One member of the community, the owner of a large ballroom, began donating the use of his space as a venue for mentoring expos and other outreach events. Others donated ballgame tickets that mentors were able to use with youth. Many chose to become involved in different aspects of education reform and other related efforts to improve school success.

A Step Toward Lasting Change

"There's a wisdom that comes with age, and a different way of thinking and being that comes with age," observes the Foundation's Patricia Campbell. "Unless you are around it and see it, you don't understand. I was 27 when I entered the aging field as a nurse. I was granddaughter-age for most of the people I was serving, but the lessons they taught me and showed me were really very profound."

Although Rochester still faces greater demand than supply of mentors, the Boomer Mentors Initiative has been a big step forward that might never have happened if staff and board leadership at the Rochester Area Community Foundation had not chosen to look differently at "aging issues." More than 120 new mentors are working to help Rochester children and youth get back and stay on course to graduate from high school. Even more significant, however, is the fact that older adults are no longer an overlooked resource. The Foundation, mentoring organizations, and others across the community have come to see adults age 50 and over as essential contributors to the health of our communities.



Key Lessons Learned through Boomer Mentors

Boomer Mentors learned many lessons about how to successfully engage older adults in the mentoring cause, including:

- **Respond quickly and personally to inquiries.** Human connection is part of what draws participants to mentoring.
- **Provide options.** One size does not fit all. Offering different kinds of mentoring situations—for example, working with children and youth of different ages—allows volunteers to tap into their own needs and interests.
- **Foster social networks.** Volunteers value the community they develop with other mentors. Regular peer support and learning opportunities contribute to older adults' satisfaction and desire to continue mentoring.
- **Recognize participant contributions.** Being acknowledged for their contributions is a powerful motivator that keeps people involved in the work.

Learn about experienced adults leading other types of change in diverse communities across the country, and access resources to help you do similar work in your community.

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