THEory into ACTion

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Group Mentoring for Resilience: Applying Community Psychology Approaches to Improve Outcomes for At-Risk Youth

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The connection between lack of educational attainment and juvenile delinquency have been well-established: High school dropouts have higher rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Accordingly, increasing the likelihood that youth complete high school may reduce criminal behavior within this age group. With this goal in mind, a program called "Project Arrive" was launched. A four-year program funded by the Department of Justice, this program seeks to identify high-risk students transitioning into high school – students who have low school grades and high rates of absences as well as certain life circumstances (e.g., homelessness). The program is being conducted in the San Francisco Unified School District's Student, Family, and Community Support Department.

Because Project Arrive incorporates guiding theories related to the field of Community Psychology and is in alignment with many of its values and principles, a collaboration has been formed with a research team at Georgia State University (GSU) in Atlanta, GA led by two Community Psychologists – Gabriel Kuperminc and Winnie Chan. This collaboration has two goals: Conducting a quasi-experimental evaluation, and developing an innovative resource for future replication of the program. Dr. Kuperminc recently spoke about his and the GSU team's

involvement in the project and how Community Psychology has been able to bring benefits to this type of program.

One of the appeals of Community Psychology is the wide applicability of its theories and principles. The group mentoring program provides an excellent example of this. First, the program is grounded in theories of resilience, which are abundant in the field of Community Psychology. The theoretical basis for this program draws from resilience theories specifically focused on youth development. It also draws from broader resilience theories from group psychotherapy for children and adults; self- and mutual-help; and developmental psychology, focused specifically on the developmental importance of different types of relationships, such as peers and adults.

Four of the principles of Community Psychology are evident in the group mentoring program as well. As already discussed, collaboration is present in the program. This collaboration takes the form of a true partnership between researchers and practitioners in which the research has been a joint effort and requires consensus between all parties. Also already discussed is the program's use of a resilience perspective; in addition, a strengths perspective is present in the program as well, as the group process applies the "helper-therapy" principle by providing the opportunity for at-risk youth to engage in a mutual help process instead of simply being recipients of assistance. The program also takes an ecological approach, as it is based on the belief that the group approach can be used to increase connectedness of at-risk youth to school via improved relationships in other microsystems (such as peers, families, and schools) and bridging connections between these microsystems. Finally, the program uses multiple methods in its approach. Research on the program consists of both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a broader perspective on program implementation and potential avenues for

improvement. This is particularly important given the long-distance collaboration and allows for the team of researchers in Georgia an enhanced perspective of the workings of the program.

The collaboration between the San Francisco and Georgia State University teams is still in its early stages. At this stage, however, there have already been both challenges and advantages. One challenge has been working with a community from such a long distance. Dr. Kuperminc firmly believes in the importance of what Kelly (1971) refers to as "eco-identity," Developing an eco-identity and developing a connection with the community in San Francisco has been problematic given the geographic divide. Another challenge is conducting research in schools – this is challenging already, and the difficulty is exacerbated with the geographic difference. The use of technology, such as web-conferencing and the use of an interactive blog to facilitate communication directly between the mentors and researchers, has helped to overcome some of the geographic challenges. One distinct advantage has been that the GSU team is working directly with the school district itself as they develop and implement their own program.

The collaboration present here between the team of Community Psychologists at GSU and the San Francisco Unified School District provides just one of many examples of the kind of diverse and outstanding work that Community Psychologists are practicing, both in the United States and internationally. One important lesson that Dr. Kuperminc has taken away from this collaboration is the importance of both liking and respecting community partners – both on a personal and professional level. The GSU research team views the San Francisco team as being knowledgeable of the culture of the schools and the district, being skilled at implementing high-quality programs, and having a strong understanding of research as a whole. At the same time, the history of this collaboration has shown that having credibility as both an academic researcher

and practitioner – "An ability to wear both hats," as Dr. Kuperminc puts it – make Community

Psychologists appealing partners for similar efforts and across community contexts.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.