

## **Political Science Professors Work with Big Brothers Big Sisters to Improve Mentoring Research and Help At-risk Youth**

*Dr. Amanda Cleveland and Dr. Lili Peaslee*

Over the past few decades, mentoring programs that match young people with caring adult role models have blossomed as a way to positively impact the lives of at-risk youth. Big Brothers Big Sisters is the largest and perhaps best known mentoring program across the country. The Harrisonburg Rockingham County chapter is the largest program in the state, serving over 750 children and youth in 2012 (Richmond, which has an operating budget fifty percent larger than BBBSHR, is the second biggest, with around 625 matches).

Mentors, or “Bigs,” at Big Brothers Big Sisters are matched with mentees aged 5-14 and commit to spend one hour a week for at least a year with their “Little.” College students, who often leave the area during the summer, are asked to commit a minimum of three semesters to the program. Matches can be site-based, where Bigs meet with their Littles at school, or community-based, in which mentors meet with their mentees outside school hours.

Many of the young people served by BBBSHR face personal, family, or environmental risk factors that increase the likelihood that they will experience negative life outcomes. A third of mentees have a diagnosed learning disability and more than 20% suffer from a chronic illness. More than two-thirds (69%) live in families earning less than \$30,000 a year and a fifth in those making less than \$10,000. Similar proportions qualify for free and reduced price lunch and thirty-two percent live in single-parent families.

Research shows that mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters can significantly affect the lives of such young people, who often lack positive role models and caring adults to help them develop a positive self-worth and make healthy life choices. Impacts of strong mentoring relationships include decreases in risky behavior, such as substance use and delinquency, and increases in positive behavior, such as improved grades, school completion, and better relationships with other adults.

Unfortunately, however, the positive results noted by many mentoring evaluations are not consistent (or of concern to researchers, statistically significant) across programs or across matches within the same mentoring program. While mentoring holds promise, the relationship that develops must be of high quality and marked by strong interpersonal connections between mentor and mentee. Moreover, since many at-risk youth have experienced instability and disappointment in their lives, when mentoring relationships end early they can actually have a negative impact and produce worse outcomes than if no mentoring had taken place. What remains unclear—in both research and in practice—is how mentoring programs can facilitate consistently strong matches.

It was with this question in mind that in 2011 we (along with former POSC professor, Gary Kirk) applied for a Best Practices in Mentoring research grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The resulting grant award of \$478,000 (the largest ever in JMU's College of Arts and Letters!) has allowed us to conduct a two-year research study examining the impact of enhanced mentor training and support on the strength of match relationships and on mentee outcomes. While research is being conducted in partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Harrisonburg Rockingham County, our development of mentor training and assessment instruments was also informed by collaboration with BBBS of America. This effort will allow us to expand the results of the project, which is currently in its final year of data collection, beyond the local community. We anticipate that our findings will be used to improve the training practices of mentoring programs nationwide.

Although it is still too soon to draw definitive conclusions from our research, OJJDP has recognized our project as a best practices site in program development and evaluation research. In 2013 they included us as one of three grantees nationwide to be showcased in a panel highlighting agency-funded research at the American Society of Criminology annual conference.

In early fall 2013, we received a second grant award from OJJDP for \$299,000 to look at factors that impact mentoring relationships beyond mentor training and support. Importantly, this new research project will also examine the long-term impacts of mentoring on youth, allowing us to better assess the cost-effectiveness of programs like BBBSHR and thus address another major hole in mentoring research.

Our OJJDP grants have also enabled us to expand funding and research opportunities for graduate students in the department's Master of Public Administration program. So far we have been able to provide tuition and stipend support for five MPA students; a sixth will begin this spring. Graduate assistants have gained experience in mentor recruitment, data entry and analysis, and have accompanied us to national conferences.

Big Brothers Big Sisters has long had a strong connection with James Madison University when it comes to mentoring local youth: nearly 90% of the agency's mentors are college students, with the vast majority hailing from JMU. Without the support of the JMU community, the agency would not be able to help as many young people in need of its services. Over the past two years, OJJDP grant funding has expanded BBBSHR outreach at the university, successfully increasing the number of mentors and children served by the program. Our research partnership with BBBSHR promises to magnify the impact of mentoring by not just expanding but also improving these relationships.

Amanda Cleveland and Lili Peaslee are both Assistant Professors of Public Policy and Administration in the Political Science Department. Together they head the Applied Research and Evaluation Team (ARET). Dr. Cleveland is currently in her fourth year at JMU; she specializes in program evaluation. Dr.

Peaslee is in her sixth year and specializes in youth development and policy studies. Both are currently involved in several other community-based research and evaluation projects that permit students in their courses to apply their knowledge to serve local needs.

For more about Big Brothers Big Sisters of Harrisonburg Rockingham County visit [http://www.bbbshr.org/site/c.ajJTLfNOJjL8H/b.6499741/k.C77A/Big\\_Brothers\\_Big\\_Sisters\\_of\\_HarrisonburgRockingham\\_County.htm](http://www.bbbshr.org/site/c.ajJTLfNOJjL8H/b.6499741/k.C77A/Big_Brothers_Big_Sisters_of_HarrisonburgRockingham_County.htm)



*Photo: From left) Members of the JMU ARET team Dr. Amanda Cleveland and Dr. Liliokanaio Peaslee with Big Brothers Big Sisters Executive Director Sue Totty and Director of Programs Emily Dovel at the Big Brothers Big Sisters office in Harrisonburg. (Photo by C. Hopson/BBBS staff)*



*Camille Vargas, shown here with her "little brother," is an International Relations major at JMU.*