

University Network In Tutoring Youth (UNITY) Literacy Project

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Purpose

- Connects Washburn students with tutoring opportunities at community-based after-school programs for minorities.
- Breaks down barriers between individuals from different backgrounds, fostering understanding among communities and increasing children's literary skills.

Background

Over the past four years, a number of community-based youth programs have contacted the University seeking tutors for their after-school projects. Each year these programs have gone unserved, mostly due to the inconsistency of the requests and the University's inability to respond on short notice. UNITY was established by Washburn students in the fall of 2001 to function as a central point of contact between these after-school programs and the University. With the development of the UNITY project, Washburn was able to match students with programs that combine diversity, social justice, and community-building in a way that makes a tangible difference in the lives of the children and provides an invaluable learning experience for the students.

How It Works

Staff

Each UNITY literacy site is coordinated by a Bonner Leader AmeriCorps student who promotes the program to the community, recruits volunteer tutors, aligns the resources of the program with the needs of the community, and acts as a liaison between Washburn, the Bonner Leader AmeriCorps Program, and the literacy site. Some Bonner Leader coordinators also tutor children at their site.

Site

There are four diverse populations targeted by UNITY. The Deer Creek Community Center primarily serves low-income African-Americans. Puente de Fe is a Hispanic outreach mission of the Methodist Church. The Prairie Band of the Potawatomi Nation Reservation Head Start Program is a daytime literacy program for three- and four-year-old native American children. The Rescue Mission, an emergency housing shelter and literacy program, targets elementary-age homeless children.

Each coordinator is carefully matched with a site based on his or her unique set of skills and interests. For example, this year's coordinator at Puente de Fe is fluent in Spanish; the coordinator at Deer Creek has extensive experience with diversity issues; and the coordinators at the Rescue Mission and Potawatomi Nation Head Start are both education majors with experience working with children.

After a literacy site is identified and a Bonner Leader is chosen to act as the site coordinator, the Bonner Leader, Bonner Leader program director, and the literacy site supervisor discuss the specific needs of the program. The coordinator, in collaboration with the site supervisor, works to adapt the program based on those discussions. The coordinator and site supervisor work together to identify the children and set up the space for the program, and tutors are recruited and trained. Tutoring sessions range from an hour and a half to two and a half hours. The children at the site are evaluated with report cards at the end of each nine-week grading period to determine their success.

What Makes The Project Unique

The UNITY project addresses literacy issues of the four above-mentioned, diverse populations within their own community. This project provides an opportunity for tutors to focus on the academic needs of the young people while also reflecting on racial and cultural diversity issues. Since the majority of the tutors are not members of a minority group and the organizations serve predominantly minority children, the coordinators focus reflection sessions on issues that facilitate better understanding between people. Although the underlying mission of UNITY is to develop a sense of connection to others, the coordinators and tutors never lose sight of the fact that their primary purpose is to improve the academic skills of the children with whom they work.

Benefits

Site coordinators monitor the needs of their program continually to ensure the quality, maintenance, and sustainability of the program. For example, this past fall, the coordinator for Deer Creek began a campaign to recruit local students as short-term tutors to ensure that the program would run smoothly and remain a constant presence in the lives of the children who are served. Short-term tutors keep the program schedule intact, even through school breaks. Several students who volunteered as short-term tutors enjoyed the experience so much that they requested to be contacted whenever spare tutors are needed.

To assure continuity when there is a turnover in Bonner Leader site coordinators, there is a transition period where two Bonners co-coordinate the site. In addition, coordinators and tutors go through periodic trainings and reflection sessions throughout the year.

Resources and Partners

Deer Creek Community Center

Puente de Fe

The Prairie Band of the Potawatomi Nation Reservation Head Start Program

The Rescue Mission

The Bonner Foundation

Washburn University

- The University is a key partner in connecting the program to the community and supports participants including students, faculty, and staff. In addition to the regular student volunteers, literacy students are also referred to the site coordinators by the financial aid office for community-based work-study positions and University faculty who incorporate service-learning into their curriculum.

Learning in the Community (LINC)

- This organization is Washburn's student-run community service organization. A Bonner Leader assists the literacy site coordinators in promoting their programs to the University community and recruiting student volunteers.

Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education (SCALE)

- Currently, the only source of funding, this onetime \$10,000 grant made it possible for the sites to obtain needed materials and promote awareness of literacy issues in the community. The AmeriCorps VISTA assigned to Washburn is trying to supplement this by obtaining book donations from publishers who specialize in children's books.

Overcoming Challenges

In the early stages of this program it was difficult to determine how to maintain consistency for the children and ensure that the program was open and available to them year round. Because tutors are college students and have academic breaks, it is a challenge to keep turnover to a minimum. It is

important to allow the children consistent exposure to their tutors and engender comfortable relationships with them in order to keep them motivated and looking forward to attending their sessions.

This challenge was overcome using several recruiting strategies devised by the Bonner Leader site coordinators. LINC began working with the financial aid office on campus to place their community-based federal work-study students. At all four literacy sites, for nine months there are other students besides the Bonner Leader site coordinator that consistently tutor the children, and there is also an overlapping transition period from one Bonner co-coordinator to another. Students who reside in Topeka throughout the year have also been actively recruited to ensure that tutors are available during school breaks.

Bonner Leader site coordinators publicize the program across campus year-round to encourage students to get involved. More recently, high school juniors and seniors are being considered as tutors to help foster an interest in and commitment to service in the next generation of college students.

Evidence of Success

The impact that the Deer Creek program had on such a positive effect on the children and the Bonner Leaders, that replications of this program have been initiated at three additional sites: Puente de Fe, the Potawatomi Nation Head Start program, and the Topeka Rescue Mission. Due to her successful experience with the program, one Bonner Leader site coordinator has decided to switch her major to elementary education.

How To Make It Grow

With the site coordinators promoting public awareness about their programs through advertising, networking, and ongoing student recruitment, these programs have the potential to continue to grow. It has also been helpful for former tutors to make themselves available to describe their experience and their site and provide the name of an on-site contact person to others on campus interested in the program.