Young Women Leaders Program:
Constructing Meaningful Mentorships in Charlottesville, Virginia

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Introduction and Evolution of Focus

“To penetrate and dissipate these clouds of darkness, the general mind must be strengthened by education.” - Thomas Jefferson

As an institution dedicated to higher learning, the University of Virginia (UVa) has an innate responsibility to positively contribute to the education of the surrounding community. This is a responsibility not only to the community, but also to its students, who stand to learn a great deal from community interaction. To a certain extent, UVa recognizes this responsibility and has established paths for its students to actively engage the Charlottesville community. Through exploratory research of UVa programs involving primary education and Charlottesville schools, including programs emphasizing student engagement with community residents, I discovered that many contain some element of mentorship. One such program on which I decided to focus my research is the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), developed and directed by UVa’s Curry School of Education and the UVa Women’s Center. YWLP, a mentoring program, seeks to understand and encourage the development of adolescent girls in the community.

However, any program seeking to connect the University to the wider Charlottesville community must necessarily exist within the considerations of the often-uneasy relationship between the two. Because this relationship has real and observable consequences for the successful implementation of the program in question, it must be given due reflection. For YWLP, these consequences substantially impact the program via the application of incentive structures and the ensuing effects on the establishment of a productive, meaningful mentoring relationship, the structure through which YWLP seeks to realize its mission of developing leadership and tolerance in both mentors and mentees.
Through my research this semester, I have attempted to understand these consequences and how they manifest themselves within the model of the program. In light of my preliminary discoveries, I feel confident in asserting the claim that taken in a historical context, YWLP suffers from a corruption of its incentive structures that makes the establishment of beneficial mentorships difficult due to differing expectations and perceptions of the program. I ultimately conclude that a potential solution lies not in a reshaping of the mentoring model employed by YWLP, but in how its curriculum is employed. Given this understanding, I intend for this paper to serve as an explication for the rationale and justification for continued research on the subject.

**Community Engagement in a Historical Context**

In order to fully understand the mission and obstacles of YWLP, one must first understand the University and Charlottesville community dynamics that are at play. In part, this entails identifying UVa’s interpretation of the concept of community engagement. Community engagement is a term that is particularly difficult to define due to a wide variety of possible constructions, but is generally understood to mean a partnership with community members in sharing resources and seeking to productively address community concerns. Ultimately, the underlying basis is an interaction, dependent on experience and expertise, within a community with the goal of effecting positive outcomes. For UVa, as an academic institution, an interpretation of community engagement includes an element of service learning. Service-learning, “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities,”1 allows the University to incorporate its pedagogical interests into its

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community engagement strategies. UVa calls this “engaged learning.” The Office of University Community Partnerships (“OUCP”) and Outreach Virginia are the means through which both faculty and students are able to reach out to the community, as well as the intended means for the Charlottesville community to access UVa’s human and intellectual resources. Through the process of attempting to create as many community engagement opportunities as possible, the concept has become deeply institutionalized in order to manage how it serves to represent and define the University. This can be seen in how UVa, under the umbrella of the OUCP, has attempted to centralize community engagement initiatives. The Community Engagement Network is “a cross-Grounds collaborative of central public service and community engagement administrators” that has met monthly since its inception in 2004 in order “facilitate opportunities for University-wide communication, coordination, and collaboration in public service.” Such centralization has ensured that the nature and language of every project is standardized to a certain extent so that taken at face value, each initiative fits neatly into the University’s policy of “engaged learning.”

This is not to say that this standardization in any way invalidates the potential of said projects or implies a negative connotation. Rather it merely notes that UVa’s status as a reputable higher-education institution makes its concern for public image in all academic areas unavoidable. Such a concern only becomes a problem if it is allowed to impede beneficial initiatives by attempting to significantly redefine their missions or goals. However, this problem may be more of a threat given UVa’s historical relationship with the Charlottesville community.

Beginning with its very construction, UVa is a university steeped in historical implications. There is a great deal of evidence of the use of slave labor to build and operate the

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early structures of the University, including the original Academical Village,\(^4\) as well as evidence of enslaved residence on the University’s grounds.\(^5\) This legacy is inseparable from the history of the University’s relations with Charlottesville’s African American population, many of who are descendants of the University’s former slaves as a product of “the absorption of the freed people into specific neighborhoods nearby.”\(^6\) Exacerbated by the destruction of African American communities such as Vinegar Hill,\(^7\) unresolved racial tensions between Charlottesville residents and the University perpetuated over time. UVa’s history of segregation and imperfect race relations exist within the student body as well. Racism at the University was still so much of an issue in 1990 that the Virginia Law Review published an article entitled “Racism and the University” that highlighted the problem of the University’s power dynamics, noting that “the power to define racism, and more generally to determine what issues will be discussed in terms of race, is prerequisite to the power to shape institutional life.”\(^8\) Clearly, the University’s obstacles in terms of race relations are not only deeply ingrained, but persistent. Only a year ago, UVa’s The Cavalier Daily published an article entitled “Students fall victim to racial slurs.”\(^9\) Incidents described by articles like this have significant implications for wider community perceptions of UVa and its student body.

Thus, the challenge for UVa becomes not only how to shape awareness and affirmative associations with its community engagement programs, but how to do so in light of its particular historical legacy. The goal is to positively influence race relations in the UVa and


\(^{6}\) Schulman.


Charlottesville community while simultaneously downplaying the problem, which is difficult in a system where the intention is academic recognition. Mentoring programs, through which UVa student mentors are able to connect with primary-aged children in Charlottesville city and Albemarle county schools, have been identified by UVa as a favorable engagement strategy due to their capability to balance these competing interests. YWLP is one such mentoring program that addresses this problem of “bridging multiple divides” by “tackling diversity in a college-based mentoring program.”

Promoting “diversity” has much better connotations than attempting to promote knowledge of and eliminate racial inequity, which would amount to admitting that racial inequity is a problem.

Young Women Leaders Program

YWLP was founded in 1997 by Edith Lawrence, a Professor at UVa’s Curry School, and Kimberly Roberts as “an after-school, curriculum-based mentoring program that pairs middle school girls with college women for a year to boost the self-esteem and leadership skills of both groups.”

Publicized as “a yearlong service-learning course,” YWLP meets all of the University’s standards of a beneficial community engagement initiative because of its combination of public service with academic pursuits “within the context of a university-community partnership.” Created after determining the mentoring needs of the community based on communications with school personnel and parents in Charlottesville, YWLP

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10 Young Women Leaders Program, "Bridging Multiple Divides: Tackling Diversity in a College-Based Mentoring Program" (2010).
12 Edith Lawrence, Melissa Levy, Nicky Martin and Judy Strother-Taylor, One-on-One and Group Mentoring: An Integrated Approach, Case Study (U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center, 2008), 2.
13 Edith Lawrence, Keonya Booker and Lauren Germain, "Young Women Leaders Program," Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice.
14 Ibid.
represents a legitimate response to community requests and is much more than a flagship program for the University. Lawrence, a specialist in the field of adolescent psychology, with help from UVa faculty and students, reviewed the relevant literature concerning adolescent development, risk behavior prevention, and mentoring strategies in order to determine the best method for the soon-to-be YWLP.\textsuperscript{16}

The basic structure of the resulting YWLP is one where female students at UVa are paired with seventh or eighth grade girls from Buford, Burley, Jouett, or Sutherland middle schools.\textsuperscript{17} The mentors, called “Bigs,” are enrolled the fall semester in a three-credit class taught by qualified faculty\textsuperscript{18} entitled EDHS\textsuperscript{19} 2891 (or cross-listed as SWAG\textsuperscript{20} 2891), Issues Facing Adolescent Girls, that “explores the various biological, psychological, social, and cultural issues affecting adolescent girls and college women and, then, integrates this learning into what is known about ‘best practices’ in mentoring.”\textsuperscript{21} Following the completion of EDHS 2891, Bigs are enrolled in EDHS 2892, a one-credit course, in order to complete the year as a mentor. The expected time commitment is five hours-per-week, including a one-hour weekly class, two-hour weekly mentoring group meetings, and one hour of one-on-one time with a Little\textsuperscript{22} per week.\textsuperscript{23} The Bigs are selected through a process involving an initial application and an interview process. During the interview, Melissa Levy, the Assistant Director of YWLP, looks for a girl who is “committed to ‘accompanying’ a middle school girl through the year, a good listener, curious

\textsuperscript{16} Lawrence, Booker and Germain.
\textsuperscript{17} Young Women Leaders Program
\textsuperscript{18} Typically taught by Edith Lawrence herself; for the Fall 2011 semester, instructors are listed as Lawrence and Melissa Levy
\textsuperscript{19} Education in Human Services
\textsuperscript{20} Studies in Women and Gender
\textsuperscript{21} Lawrence, Booker and Germain.
\textsuperscript{22} The middle school participants in YWLP are known as “Littles”
\textsuperscript{23} Based on a document headed “Be a happy and successful YWLP Big Sister!” that establishes expectations of and guidelines for Big selection.
about a Little Sister’s life, persistent, open-minded, responsible, who takes initiative, is excited to have new experiences, and is interested in connecting with the Charlottesville community”24 in order to attempt to ensure that the Bigs chosen for the program have the necessary intentions and expectations.

As for the Littles, the selection process is quite different and entirely dependent on the research interests of YWLP administrators. The research component of YWLP is conducted by the YWLP administrators and assistants involved with UVa’s Curry School. All research is “grounded in a randomized, experimental design” in order to examine “the experiences of both the college women who serve as mentors and the middle school participants, as well as the perceptions of the middle school participants’ parents.”25 The purpose of conducting research is to both learn from and improve the mentoring techniques as implemented by YWLP.

Furthermore, continued research is indispensable to YWLP due to its dependence on research grants used to sustain the project in its entirety. To date, YWLP has received grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the William T. Grant Foundation,26 the University of Virginia,27 and most recently from the U.S. Department of Justice28 to evaluate the effectiveness of its mentoring strategy “in preventing delinquency and related outcomes in girls who are at-risk for delinquency based on individual and/or ecological characteristics.”29 Due to the nature of the research and evaluation aspect, the program necessitates that participating middle school girls be

24 Ibid.
25 Young Women Leaders Program
27 Specifically through the Jefferson Public Citizens Program, the Commission on the Future of the University, and the Vice-Provost’s for Internal Programs.
28 “Bridging Multiple Divides”.
nominated by school counselors on the basis of being “at risk for making poor academic, social, or emotional decisions, but who have shown potential to become leaders.”

**Measuring Effect**

In light of the contribution of such research, the question becomes how successful YWLP has been proven to be, and in what areas. Overall, YWLP’s mentoring model has been shown to be highly effective. YWLP’s use of a yearlong class in order to keep Bigs both accountable and involved in the mentorship is one element of its model that has improved on mentoring strategy. Prior research has shown that “mentoring relationships which are inconsistent or short in duration (less than three months) can actually be damaging to youth,” and the requirements of a University-credited course help to mitigate this damage. Likewise, YWLP’s use of both one-on-one and group mentoring models have allowed for its notable positive effects. One-on-one time allows the Big and Little to bond, forging a meaningful connection, while the group design holds both Big and Little accountable for participation. The added group dimension provides an additional support system in the event of an inadequate Big-Little relationship, and allows both Big and Little to benefit from the individual experiences of others in the group. Overall, benefits of YWLP participation can be seen in middle schools girls in that “more than 70% of the girls who participate in YWLP indicated that being a part of YWLP had changed the way they: 1) dealt with problems at home

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30 Lawrence, Levy, Martin and Strother-Taylor., 1.
31 Grossman and Rhodes as quoted in Joanna M. Lee, Lauren J. Germain, Edith C. Lawrence and Jenna H. Marshal, “”It opened my mind, my eyes. It was good”; Supporting College Students’ Navigation of Difference in a Youth Mentoring Program,” Educational Horizons, 2010., 34.
32 Ibid., 35.
and at school, 2) supported their friends, 3) made decisions, and 4) thought about themselves and their futures.”

An element of the YWLP mission includes the goal of promoting values of diversity and tolerance in both Bigs and Littles. This goal is a product of the racial tensions as described above, their direct consequences for YWLP, and YWLP’s ideal situation in potentially affecting positive change. Such progress is possible, as “mentoring programs can potentially create and support optimal conditions for diverse interactions that can ultimately lead to prejudice reduction and other positive outcomes for college students serving as mentors.” As YWLP attempts to mitigate these tensions through the construction of productive personal relationships between UVa students and community members, the existing association between UVa and Charlottesville’s African American population has direct negative consequences on the ability to establish such desirable relationships. Many African American families whose daughters are asked to participate in YWLP have immediate reservations about not only the mission of the program and the intentions of the Bigs, but of the very values promoted by the curriculum. Furthermore, there is much debate on “whether and how racial and ethnic backgrounds of mentors and mentees matter,” for though cross-race pairs may be viewed to promote tolerance and understanding, some critics argue that mentees are less likely to benefit from or trust white mentors. This argument is based on the idea that non-white mentees will best benefit from a mentor who has also experienced racism. Regardless of the consequences of cross-race matching, racial disparities between Bigs and Littles present above-mentioned challenges to the

33 Young Women Leaders Program
34 Lee, Germain, Lawrence, and Marshal., 36.
35 Ibid., 34
36 Assertion based on personal interviews conducted with YWLP Bigs and Administrators.
37 Grant-Thompson and Atkinson, 1997 as quoted in Lee, Germain, Lawrence, and Marshal., 34.
success of YWLP’s diversity initiatives. While 66% of Littles are non-white, only 32% of Bigs are.

Though significant, race relations are not the only obstacle to healthy Big-Little relationships in YWLP. Though not distinct to UVa and Charlottesvile, socioeconomic differences present substantive challenge. Social class tensions between Charlottesville and the University constitute an additional divide between Big and Little. 84% of Bigs have parents with a college education or higher, compared to only 46% of Littles. According to 2010 census data for Charlottesville, the median household income is $38,369 (as compared to a national average of $51,425). Contrarily, a survey conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles in 2007 found that “today’s college freshmen are more financially advantaged today than they have been at any point in the last 35 years and come from families with a median income 60 percent higher than the national average.” The consequences of these socioeconomic divides are similar to that of racial disparities in that parents often question the intentions of the program and the Bigs, but socioeconomic disparities additionally led to assumptions of the wealth status of YWLP Bigs, as well as an underlying assumption of the responsibility of Bigs to spend money on their potentially less-advantaged Littles. Moreover, socioeconomic differences are by no means limited to racial divides.

38 “Bridging Multiple Divides”
39 Ibid.
42 All un-cited assertions in this and following sections may be attributed to conclusions drawn from and statements made in personal interviews conducted with YWLP Bigs and administrators.
Ultimately, race and class disparities between Bigs and Littles have presented unanticipated challenges to the success of YWLP regarding not only its goals in fostering improved student-community understanding and tolerance, but have similarly impeded the program’s mentoring mission in general. This is not to say that the model employed by YWLP of “1) a combination of one-on-one and group mentoring, and 2) yearlong weekly training and supervision for the mentors,” is itself faulty, for it has proven to be the preferred method of constructing beneficial mentoring relationships. It is only to say that the application of the model by UVa to Charlottesville has significant implications to the program’s overall incentive structure.

A Problem of Incentives

Given the inescapability of the impact of race and social class tensions on a program seeking to address and mitigate them, the incentive structures for the Bigs, Littles and their parents, and the University must be viewed in this historical context. For Littles and their Parents, this means understanding their perceptions of UVa programs and students prior to and during involvement and how these perceptions interact with how YWLP is publicized to the community as well as how Littles are nominated and selected. With incoming perceptions of disingenuousness of both the Bigs’ and the program generally the mentoring relationship is already set back. The skepticism of many parents that the program may be “a form of compensation [for past wrongs], as opposed to something that is really genuine” is immediately apparent to many Bigs. In what could be viewed as an attempt by YWLP to moderate this factor,

43 Lawrence et al. 2009 as quoted in Lee, Germain, Lawrence, and Marshal., 36
44 With this section I do not aim to undermine any participant’s intentions in participating in YWLP, only to point out that the incentive structure, when applied to Charlottesville, may be to blame for problems in the mentor-mentee relationship.
45 Interview.
the program is advertised as an after-school recreational activity.\textsuperscript{46} However, when combined with original opinions of dubious incentives, this type of publicity has only lead to a perception of YWLP and its mentors as “babysitters.” Thus, although parents are initially skeptical and unsupportive, they may be nevertheless incentivized to take advantage of the program as an extension of the school day. Further exacerbating the problem, parents who learn of their daughter’s selection for participation due to her identification as “at-risk” may be offended and become altogether unreceptive, if not pull their daughter from the program entirely.\textsuperscript{47}

Unsurprisingly, part of the underlying problem here is not only negative perceptions going in, but also a failure of YWLP to provide a sound understanding to parents about the explicit mission of the program. Ultimately, the cumulative effect is a preliminary lack of respect for YWLP, causing some parents to be unsupportive of the program’s goals and requirements.

Some such requirements, for example guaranteeing attendance, are only a problem due to a failure of the incentive structure for participating Littles. As an unavoidable consequence of the method of Little selection, many middle school girls have little incentive to become invested in YWLP. The nature of a system that nominates and chooses girls for participation cannot rightfully expect enthusiasm and loyalty from every girl. Requests for participation can be denied; however, lack of understanding, above-mentioned parental incentives, and participation of peers keeps many would-be uninterested girls in the program. Needless to say, even those who do commit to participate may not be actively engaged in the pedagogical elements of YWLP or overly concerned with establishing a beneficial relationship with their Bigs. Some

\textsuperscript{46} Albemarle County, \textit{Albemarle Family}, http://www.albemarlefamily.com/kids_recreation_year_round.htm (accessed 2011).

\textsuperscript{47} In the initial letter offering participation in YWLP that is sent home to parents, it is not explicitly stated that the girl in question has been identified for potential “at-risk” behavior.
girls may even attempt to avoid participation altogether after evaluating her time as better-spent elsewhere.

As for the Bigs, participation is a choice; however, a failure of information may again be to blame for equally questionable incentives. Though the function of YWLP as a class is a necessary and beneficial element of the program, it does have some unintended incentive-related consequences. Because of the group structure of YWLP, the aspect of peer dynamics is put in play. When combined with YWLP’s somewhat dissatisfying and ineffective recruitment strategy for Bigs, this causes the prospective applicant pool to be largely made up of friends of current YWLP mentors. Essentially, new YWLP Bigs hear of the program via word of mouth, and choose to apply/participate due to a friend’s participation. Additionally, this tendency of YWLP to be advertised by current or past mentors perpetuates normative judgments of the program, such as the idea that the class is an “easy A.” Even if not easy, the fact that YWLP is offered for UVa credit will attract girls seeking an alternative to traditional classroom learning. Mentors who enter the program for these reasons, or because “mentoring” is beneficial to their resumes, are unlikely to have expectations of YWLP that are consistent with the program’s demands. If it is not an issue of inadequate time allocation due to unexpected time demands of YWLP, few Bigs expect or are mentally prepared for the immense responsibility and emotional commitment necessary to engage in a fruitful mentoring relationship. In practice, this leads to “an idealized sense of what the relationship should look like,” and frustration if this is not the case. The fact that “college students have unpredictable academic schedules and their motivation to serve as mentors can be egotistic” illustrates how necessary it is to establish expectations that are

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48 Interview.
49 Rhodes and DuBois, 2006 as quoted in Lee, Germain, Lawrence, and Marshal., 34
consistent with program demands, for some Bigs may in fact be just as disingenuous as they are assumed to be by skeptical parents.

Along the same lines, many Bigs feel overwhelmed by the parental response, which may or may not be positive. Though “race and ethnic identity development” is a tenant of the curriculum, many mentors still feel underprepared to handle the implications of racial or class tensions that they encounter when beginning to establish a relationship with the Little and her family. In particular this inability to relate contributes to the fact that some Bigs “tend to think about middle school girls and their values as being identical to their own. So they might not understand why a middle schooler doesn’t want to do her homework or might get in trouble… and provides an opportunity for being judgmental.” Furthermore, because the Littles are girls identified as those with the potential to make troubling social decisions, this may mean that they are dealing with relationship pressures that Bigs may not consider relevant to a twelve or thirteen year old girl. Because “mentoring early adolescent girls deemed at risk can be challenging since they often feel overwhelmed with relationship issues among their family and friends,” many Bigs may be dealing themselves with the same personal relationship issues facing their Littles and thus unable to successfully navigate such similarities in a mentoring relationship. Though the YWLP training curriculum does seek to address some of these issues, the Bigs are forced to respond to both potentially unengaged Littles and unsupportive parents before they have completed the YWLP course.

50 Particularly those involved in cross-race pairings.
51 Unfortunately, many UVa students are unaware of community perceptions of UVa and UVa students. Many of those who are aware lack the personal experience necessary to fully comprehend the dynamics at play or know how to appropriately respond.
52 Interview.
53 Lawrence, Levy, Martin, and Strother-Taylor., 1
Finally, due to its inherent reliance on the racial and social inequities that exist in Charlottesville in so far as they determine which middle school girls are identified as “at-risk,” the multiple incentives facing the University are contradictory in and of themselves. It is in UVa’s best interest to publicize YWLP as a groundbreaking mentorship program by highlighting its degree of success in admirable goals such as a “focus on promoting middle school girls’ leadership abilities,” and this is exactly how it is touted to the public. Upon superficial inquiry, the language of the program is exactly what you would expect from the University’s policy of promoting beneficial service-learning programs. However, because of the necessity of the research component of the program and its reliance on identifying Littles as “at-risk,” this language is potentially undermined. Because of a funding dependency, the demands of the research component would ultimately supersede the stated mission of leadership development should they come into conflict. Conflict need not necessarily be the case; however, because the two are not mutually exclusive. The problem arises when guidance counselors are asked to identify girls who are “at-risk” and show leadership potential. The “at-risk” qualifier, because it is both more important to the requirements of the research and a more objective value than determinants on leadership potential, is likely to be the preeminent consideration. Ultimately, because of the heavy emphasis of leadership development to the public, including participating schools and families, their perceptions of YWLP are vastly different from those of its faculty and mentors, who are patently aware of how and why the Littles were selected. The discrepancy in perceptions of the mission of the program leads to unavoidable inconsistencies in how Bigs and Littles view and interact with each other. Pre-conceived notions formed by Bigs exacerbate the

55 This is both because “at-risk” behavior is more easily identifiable through behavioral assessments and because the concept of leadership potential is so subjective as to be inadequate in successfully singling-out some girls over others.
problem of an inability to relate due to racial and socioeconomic differences and contribute to parental skepticism of goals and intentions.

The failure of YWLP’s incentive structures lies in its inability to fully reconcile differing perceptions and expectations in order to establish mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationships. The combination of a lack of emotional preparedness on the part of Bigs, lack of Littles’ investment, lack of parental support, and inconsistent and often obstructive perceptions of one another are problems that can be viewed as having originated from the application of a mentoring program such as YWLP to a community like Charlottesville. This problem of application exists because of the community’s fundamental cynicism towards the University that sponsors the program. Only a problem because of the historical context of the University and the surrounding Charlottesville community, the major responsibility of responding to the issues raised is that of the training process. The Bigs must be sufficiently trained in order to overcome the challenges posed by community and Littles’ perceptions and expectations of YWLP as well as their own for the purpose of successfully establishing a meaningful mentoring relationship.

**Proposal for Continued Research**

As I do not see a problem with the mentoring model, only with its application, and because the racial and class differences, as an integral part to the foundation and mission of YWLP, are not soon to disappear, the obvious question becomes how best to train the Bigs to handle these challenges. Due to YWLP’s model of using a graded class to hold Bigs responsible for learned approaches to mentoring, focusing on improving the training that Bigs already receive is the improvement strategy most applicable to YWLP.
The first step in answering this question is to evaluate the current training process for the Bigs. This step would provide an in-depth understanding of the tenants of the curriculum, their rationale, and their implementation. The next step is to question how effective the current training curriculum is in preparing Bigs for successful mentorships. The purpose of this step is to begin to differentiate between elements of the curriculum that are included yet inefficient and elements that would be beneficial but are currently absent. This step would call for an appraisal based on all research to date on the YWLP curriculum as well as an appraisal of how prepared the Bigs consider themselves to be by the current training process.

In order to pursue the first two steps, it would be necessary to gain access to and thoroughly analyze all current research done on YWLP and its curriculum. However, because all of the research done evaluating YWLP is conducted internally, it must be considered with a critical eye. This particularity would necessitate questioning the reliability of the produced research and taking steps to validate its credibility before depending on its claims to answer the above-outlined questions. Evaluating the evaluation process itself would not only authenticate or disprove its findings, but would ascertain whether or not the questions posed by YWLP researchers are even the right ones to ask. It may very well be that the problem is not biased conclusions, but instead biased topics of inquiry.

Following an analysis of the current curriculum and its effectiveness, the final step is to determine how the current curriculum could be improved. This determination would include exploring how training could be bettered in both minor ways, such as amending certain aspects, as well as in more profound ways, such as redefining entire elements.

In order to best substantiate my own findings, the chosen methodology in pursuing this research question would need to be more targeted and consistent than my exploratory method
this semester of interviewing Bigs and administrators on broad experience-oriented topics about YWLP. I intend to approach the above questions with a qualitative method employing both focus groups and key-informant interviews.

Focus groups consisting of about four or five Bigs each would help evaluate the current training process as well as illuminate areas for growth and improvement. Similarly, by questioning the Bigs directly, YWLP can be evaluated without relying on internally conducted research. Such questions may include:

- What were your expectations of what was required of you upon entering YWLP?
- What were your initial perceptions/expectations of your Little?
- What were the biggest challenges you faced in establishing a relationship with your Little? With her family? Why were these challenges present?
- What do you believe is the responsibility of the Littles and their parents in contributing to a successful mentorship? The responsibility of YWLP? Your own responsibility?
- Did you feel adequately prepared for your mentoring relationship? Why or why not?
- What improvements could/should be made to the curriculum? To the program in general?

Questions of these sorts would seek to answer the question of how best to prepare mentors given the personal experiences of the Bigs as well as the specific demands of the Charlottesville community.

Key informant interviews would focus on YWLP administrators, Littles’ parents, and objective observers to address the questions from all sides:

- What are the involved expectations?
- What are the involved perceptions?
- What are the challenges to establishing beneficial mentorships? Why do they exist?
- How are these challenges addressed by the Big training process? Can/should the process be improved?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure that a successful relationship is established?

Ultimately, my intention is not to criticize the Young Women Leaders Program. I am convinced of its potential, if not current efficacy, in profoundly benefitting both Bigs and Littles alike. I only hope to positively contribute to helping the program better realize its potential to
improve the relationship between the University and surrounding community while fostering the leadership values that define its mission.

**Conclusion**

When considering community engagement programs at UVa, YWLP cannot be overlooked. It has seen obvious successes in its stated goals and has the potential, due to its ideal situation within the University’s service-learning institution, to continue to profoundly improve the University-community relationship. However, growth and improvement require constructive criticism that can only be provided from outside the institution. This is the role that I hope to play in my continued work with YWLP.
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** As noted in some of my footnotes, the majority of my claims, particularly those outlining flaws in the YWLP incentive structure, are based on interviews conducted with both YWLP Bigs and administrators. For confidentiality’s sake, I have not differentiated from which interview each idea/quote originated.