



## EVALUATION

# “To Stand Strong In Who They Are:” 2015 Evaluation Report of the LIHI/WWU Mentoring Project

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# ACRONYMS

LIHI	Low Income Housing Institute
WWU	Western Washington University
PAR	Participatory Action Research

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mentoring project met its 2015 goal of supporting LIHI housing residents in becoming more self-determined as they achieved self-identified short- and long-term goals for themselves and their communities. Working one-on-one with LIHI mentors/tutors, residents measurably improved their digital literacy skills, including increased understanding of Internet conventions, facility with basic search engine use, proficiency in email functionality, and using social media for knowledge sharing, public communication and staying in touch with family and friends. Residents benefitted in other, more qualitative and socially beneficial ways as well; involvement in supportive and trusting relationships with LIHI mentors, increased social skills and a sense of connectivity to others. Mentors experienced positive learning too. Their perspectives and awareness of the issues of at-risk populations became more informed as they developed and improved on teaching, tutoring, and mentoring skills. In addition, through their work in this project, mentors were able to highlight the valuable community resources available to support residents' self-generated goals. Mentors also drew on their own diverse backgrounds and experiences, expanding on their individual cultural competencies to create better and more equal partnerships with residents.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE MENTORING PROJECT

The Low-Income Housing Institute, or, LIHI (<https://lihi.org>) provides affordable housing in six counties in Western Washington and houses over 4,000 people who are referred to as *residents*. Many LIHI residents have experienced housing instability and are a diverse population of U.S. citizens and immigrants and refugees with various needs and goals. Western Washington University, or, WWU's (<https://www.wwu.edu>) mission focuses on equity and inclusion in education and Woodring's College of Education, Department of Health and Community Studies focuses on social justice across all communities in Washington State in terms of health, education, and human services. The department's Adult & Higher Education program (<https://wce.wwu.edu/ahe/adult-and-higher-education>), which houses the mentoring partnership, focuses specifically on the education and learning of adults in Washington State.

The LIHI/WWU Mentoring Project is a partnership between LIHI and Woodring College of Education's Adult and Higher Education program at Western Washington University. Together they are working toward the respective goals of affordable housing and social support, equity and inclusion in education,

and social justice in communities in Washington State. The project is a program focusing on recruiting and training local community college student tutors/mentors to work with residents of LIHI housing communities. During the first years (2013) of the LIHI/WWU program, WWU students were recruited to provide tutoring/mentoring, and commuted from Bellingham to Seattle on a weekly basis for the tutoring sessions. However the logistics of commuting from Bellingham to Seattle on a regular basis was challenging. As a result, in 2014 the partnership began to recruit and train students from North Seattle Community College, Seattle Central Community College, and South Seattle Community College (note, these colleges have since dropped the word *Community* from their titles). This logistical and geographic fix has allowed the program demonstrably more latitude for tutors/mentors (hereinafter *mentors*), in terms of recruiting, training and collaboration, in working with residents from the same community, toward the goals of the partnership. It builds further on the work detailed in 2014's Evaluation Report that can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/movingforward2014LIHIWWUReport>.

Overall, the program has emphasized the strengths found in community-based education, with a broad spectrum of community members and institutions collaborating to benefit one another as well as the members of their communities.

There were four major stakeholders in the project:

1. LIHI: provided access and information concerning the goals and scope of the program to residents and matched resident mentee candidates with appropriate mentor candidates.
2. WWU: provided overall direction, funding, and the operating framework for the program; WWU also recruited mentors with the assistance of Seattle area community colleges.
3. Mentors: comprised of Seattle area community college students; engaged in peer, informal, and non-formal learning situations that encouraged developing leadership and mentoring skills.
4. LIHI residents: individuals chosen from those enrolled in LIHI's *Computer and Job-Search Training* program; residents were exposed to opportunities for increasing digital literacy and expanding job preparedness opportunities.

The mentors were a diverse group, familiar both with the specific communities involved in the program and the general challenges at-risk populations face. Many mentors detailed overcoming similar challenges along their paths to becoming successful college students. Primarily, mentors provided residents direct tutoring in digital literacy skills. However, they also completed training in general mentoring skills prior to and during direct tutoring, and subsequently provided mentoring to residents who needed or desired additional levels of support. The mentors were paid a \$500 honorarium once they completed their work for the project.

The residents included a high percentage of those who are, or were, at-risk populations living in long-term or transitional housing. All residents had experienced homelessness in the past. A significant number were immigrants or refugees, and reported that a lack of digital literacy skills often combined with additional barriers in income, language fluency and social capital presented significant challenges in achieving employment and even accessing basic goods and services.

The LIHI/WWU partnership program operated for two consecutive years (2014-2015) under the direction of a team comprised of members, students, and staff of WWU, LIHI, and Seattle community colleges. During the two-year period, the program matriculated 18 mentors and residents. Ultimately, LIHI residents were empowered to overcome social and learning challenges as they moved towards

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## **MATCHING**

For the mentors, the program began with a 4-hour face-to-face orientation and workshop including an initial online training module. This included introductory onboarding from LIHI, organizational backgrounding, information about residents and prospective mentees, and concluded with protocol regarding professional and ethical mentor-resident interaction.

After the orientation, the LIHI Volunteer Coordinator matched volunteer mentors to residents based on mutual needs, interests, and schedules. The mentor-resident pairs then negotiated convenient meeting schedules to conduct weekly tutoring sessions. It was important to utilize public meeting sites like libraries that ensured free access to computers and that were also near LIHI residences and LIHI community sites that had computers. During the program, mentors and residents met once a week for one-hour and half-hour sessions. These were monitored and maintained by the LIHI coordinator and the results were communicated to the WWU training staff.

## INTERVIEWS

During initial tutoring sessions, mentors conducted entrance interviews with residents, utilizing protocol designed to assess residents' short- and long-term goals and objectives, the general character of and access to their social support resources or *social capital*, and their technical facility with digital tools, or their *digital literacy*. These initial interview data allowed mentors and residents to co-construct viable work plans toward achieving resident goals and objectives throughout the program and to get to know who they were and about their lives, needs and interests.

Near completion of the 12-week program, exit interviews were conducted with the residents. Data from these interviews lead to informal assessment of progress and change toward resident goals and objectives as well as development of "next step" actions for new goal-setting efforts going forward. These new goals were fulfilled through *participatory action research* (PAR) projects (to be discussed below) that were co-designed by mentors and residents together.

## ONGOING ONLINE MENTOR TRAINING

The online training component of the program was available for mentors as soon as the orientation was completed. It was experiential, discussion-based, and engaged peer learning designed to support mentors' tutoring effectiveness in addition to their knowledge of community-based education. Topics included sound mentoring practice, digital literacy, community-based education, and participatory action research, or, PAR (see the *Findings for Mentors and Residents* section of this report for a more detailed discussion).

Course facilitators guided these online training sessions for mentors and participated in online group and individual discussion on a nearly daily basis. This format provided mentors a forum for critical self-reflective practice concerning their ongoing tutoring and mentorship experiences and they could share information with one another and learn together. Each mentor additionally had at least four phone conferences with either the course facilitator (the Project Manager) or the Project Liaison (see video here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPnuGK674Ys>, for additional information about the online training).

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) PROJECTS

For mentors, one of the central deliverables for their online training was the PAR project. Applying the skills they learned online, mentors designed and created PAR projects that could contribute to supporting the longer-term goals of the residents. The WWU instructor coached the mentors during regular advising meetings and peers shared their PAR ideas or work with one another. Mentors and residents worked together to choose a topic based on initial interview data, a digital literacy assessment, and information generated during early tutoring sessions. These projects focused on the next steps for the residents and engaged community resources and support that they would need to navigate.

## PROGRAM COMPLETION

The program concluded at the end of the twelve-week period upon online training module completion, exit interviews between mentors and residents, and a final tutoring session wherein mentors presented their PAR projects to residents, and to the WWU instructor.

## OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

The LIHI/WWU program operated for two years under the direction of the same WWU team; in that time, three mentor cohorts completed the program, as did numerous residents.

In 2014, the program began on January 1<sup>st</sup> and ran concurrently with Winter Quarter at Seattle area colleges. During this time, the cohort consisted of 10 mentors. The program was to be completed in twelve weeks.

The following obstacles arose: (a) the process of matching mentors to residents was a sensitive and thoroughgoing process that often took longer than expected due to logistical challenges; (b) irregular session attendance and attrition by residents often left mentors without resident collaborators with whom to complete the program and re-matching took time; and (c) mentors often found it difficult to complete the online training portion of the program after they had been decoupled from a resident mentee or were waiting for a new match

The above-mentioned inconsistencies made it exceedingly difficult to complete the program in twelve weeks. With these constraints, we found that it could take mentors weeks beyond the intended end date to complete all program requirements.

One notable change from 2014 to 2015 was in transitioning from one large cohort per year, to two smaller cohorts of five. This change was recommended by the incoming LIHI Volunteer Coordinator who felt that such a large mentor cohort adversely affected Coordinator time management. Five-person cohorts began in spring 2015, and continued in fall beginning 2015: both were expected to run concurrently with Spring and Fall Quarters of the academic calendar.

The WWU team also created two new positions. First, a Seattle-based position, called the WWU/LIHI Liaison. The intent was to relieve some of the burden placed on the LIHI Volunteer Coordinator and to improve the team's ability to understand mentor/resident relationships. The Liaison worked out of the LIHI main office and from home in Seattle. Responsibilities included interacting with mentors, closely monitoring mentor/resident interactions and supporting their persistence, and providing firsthand information regarding the progress of those interactions to the WWU team in Bellingham. A second position was created at WWU in Bellingham called the Special Project Manager. The Special Project Manager oversaw general direction of the program, with the Liaison reporting directly to him. He also was directly responsible for interacting with mentors, supporting them in the online training, and helping to develop PAR projects. These two positions improved communication and connectivity between operations in Seattle and WWU team members in Bellingham.

As indicated above, initial pairing periods of residents to appropriate mentors early during the spring 2015 cohort were unfavorably prolonged due to scheduling issues. However, by the fall 2015 cohort, the process was much more streamlined, and there was a higher percentage of timely and successful mentor-resident pairings, each within two weeks of mentors having completed the required background checks.

Generally, as the community college quarter progressed and workloads increased in conjunction with their time tutoring the residents, there was a drop in online training involvement for mentors. This also meant learners tended to participate on a "rotating" basis in the online training, meaning they participated in spurts, often depending on other scheduling constraints, without sustained engagement.

This was felt strongest by the smaller cohorts. In the larger cohort in 2014 there seemed to be enough learners that as some rotated out, others rotated in, always leaving enough active participants available for online discussions. In the smaller cohorts, participation was spottier and this made it difficult to build a sense of continuity in online discussion forums. The learning community in the larger 2014 cohort seemed to have provided a more sustained, dynamic and interactive community conversation over time. Yet in all cases in both 2014 and 2015, the mentors prioritized their tutoring of residents and were constants in tutoring. It became apparent that the tutoring of the residents and the relationships they developed, above and beyond anything else was the most important aspect of the mentor experience.

The WWU-side of the program is largely dependent on the LIHI volunteer coordinator to identify residents that would be appropriate for the program, promptly match them with suitable mentors, and then to ensure a sufficient amount of support is provided to make the mentor/resident interactions successful. For the program to move forward, it would be essential to have a LIHI Volunteer Coordinator who is motivated towards putting commitment, time, and energy into growing the strength of the relationship between WWU and LIHI, otherwise it could lose both momentum and efficiency.

## **GOALS—2015**

The broad goals of the LIHI/WWU Mentoring Project remained the same as 2014:

1. To provide one-on-one tutoring to residents living in LIHI housing. Instruction included: job search training and other skills identified by the residents themselves. The broader goal was to assist residents in becoming more self-determined.
2. To provide mentors with a valuable learning experience and develop or improve on skills and strategies designed to support at-risk populations. These skills and strategies included: tutoring, mentoring, interpersonal relations, and community-based education.
3. To provide support for residents toward broadening digital literacy skills, technology access and digital inclusion as well as social capital.

### **GOAL 1: DIRECT TUTORING**

While the program's online training provided the mentors with valuable background on at-risk populations and familiarity with support strategies, the central part of their learning experience was tutoring a person living in LIHI's transitional or permanent supportive residences. Their goal throughout the course of the 12-week program was to help residents become more self-determined, in terms of improving not only their skills and knowledge about job searches and computers, but also developing their social capital to integrate more fully into their communities.

### **GOAL 2: MENTOR DEVELOPMENT**

In order for mentors to understand how to help at-risk populations to become more self-determined, it was important to encourage a foundational understanding of the causes of at-risk status and a forum for critical self-reflection on practice. This was a primary goal of the program's online training portion and discussion boards. The LIHI residents had experienced homelessness in the past and it was important for mentors to grow their literacy of homelessness, including the structural causes and challenges that transitional populations living in long-term housing face. The mentors' engagement with these issues was

met through both tutoring as well as online training and discussion which served to work toward better understandings of how to support diverse at-risk learners.

### **GOAL 3: SHARING DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS**

Individual goals for improving digital literacy skills during the program fell into two broad areas:

- (a) understanding that access to almost all basic goods and services in the United States requires basic digital literacy skills, including that in order to apply for jobs, obtain social services, access banking services, or participate in educational services, one must be able to access the Internet, utilize digital communications including email, and fill out digital forms; and
- (b) improving access to and facility with social networking in order to increase digital literacy, utilizing high resident motivation for digital communication with family and friends in addition to engage in wider networking within communities.

In addition, a large percentage of the PAR projects created by the 2015 mentors worked toward supporting the tutoring their residents received in digital literacy skills. Included in these projects were the creation of reference guides that operated as types of “cheat sheets” which were designed to aid residents in retaining and easily recalling information regarding digital and technology skills that had been covered in the tutoring sessions and which focused on their next steps as well as community resources.

## **FINDINGS FOR RESIDENTS AND MENTORS**

As a result of the interactions between mentors and residents during their tutoring sessions, we found both groups benefited in many areas beyond the identified program outcomes. Common underlying positive themes emerged for both mentors and residents. These themes included improved learning, teaching, tutoring, and mentoring skills, a better understanding of the importance of persistence and patience in the learning environment, and the necessity for advocacy for at-risk populations. These themes all stress a need toward improving social understandings of the challenges faced by at-risk and transitional housing populations and homelessness. Moreover, these themes underscore the need to work toward removing barriers and reducing negative stereotypes that hinder at-risk individuals from establishing self-determination.

In addition to the above-mentioned generative themes, the tutoring sessions also presented a number of challenges to both mentors and residents. Most often, these resulted from scheduling difficulties, childcare problems, the lack of software and updates on the computers in LIHI facilities, difficulty in procuring parking, and often overcrowded facilities providing public computer use. However, working together to overcome such challenges helped to develop the rapport between mentors and residents. Sharing common experiences and interactions helped form relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

The following sections further describe these themes.

### **IMPROVEMENTS IN LEARNING**

Although the face-to-face mentor orientation attempted to prepare the mentors for the challenges they would face preparing for and during tutoring sessions, it was not until mentors began one-on-one work with residents that they came to understand the opportunities for and obstacles to improved learning

that were immanent to the project. This section documents some of these learning improvements.

For most residents in the spring and fall 2015 cohorts, entry-level basic digital literacy skills were assessed to be at low levels. However, after having completed the program, they: (a) improved their digital literacy skills which led to basic control in utilizing digital technologies formerly unfamiliar to residents; (b) increased knowledge and use of social media—especially email and Facebook—which led to increased connectivity and access to social support from non-local family and friends; and (c) increased accessibility for other critical digital skills and knowledge not previously accessible (home budget accounting software, for example) that allowed residents to establish new vocations or locate new sources of support

For example, one mentor reported that her partner resident was positively motivated to attend regular one-on-one tutoring as he came to better navigate the Internet to inform himself about his home country and to pursue his interests. She said:

The tutoring sessions are going well; the only problem so far is that I have to remind N. (the LIHI resident) about the session before so he doesn't forget. He is making progress and he is happy that he can find news about the city he is from in Ethiopia and he can watch football on YouTube.

Another mentor, M., described her resident partner's digital literacy progress in clear terms:

N. is now comfortable with Google searching, YouTube, Gmail, and Facebook. We quickly review the things we have practiced in the past and start on a couple new things. We are starting to learn the very basics of Word.

Mentors also experienced improvements in tutoring strategy and perseverance as they worked with residents toward their goals. Mentor G.B. talked of the challenges presented by conflicting schedules, adapting to overcome them, and how having a learner motivated by burgeoning digital literacy skills can be a great benefit:

The good thing about the sessions is that B. (the LIHI resident) is motivated and eager to learn more. This said, the sessions are not without challenges. Because B. has to deal with after school activities for her kids, and feeling tired after work, the timing that I am available sometimes may not be convenient for her. Despite such challenges, our meeting is going effectively.

## **IMPROVED PERSISTENCE AND PATIENCE**

The mentor/resident pairs also developed a growing sense of persistence and patience toward a more self-determined and comfortable atmosphere and demonstrated this by consistently overcoming many different logistical, pedagogical, and social challenges.

Mentor L.A. discussed her work with resident L. and, despite ongoing challenges, both she and L. improved as learners, developing patience and persistence along the way as they negotiate the inner workings of their partnership:

My tutoring experience has been good so far. One of the things I like to do before we start our tutoring, I remind L. whatever we will be talking is confidential. I want to make sure he feels comfortable and open up on his needs whatever that might be. I do remind L. me being there is a partnership and that makes him feel comfortable (we are learning together). I do let him know

I'm not an expert but I will do my best to help him. I encourage him to speak up if there is any problem right away, I'm not perfect. I remind myself often working with someone with computers is very easy (grab the mouse) and do the work for them, but *I keep having him doing it himself*. I did discuss with L. clearly if I ask him to repeat doing something is not that I'm looking down upon him but my biggest hope by the end of this project he has learn something. He is eager and willing to learn.

Mentor N.S. related the pressure faced by a college student volunteer mentor with a busy life juggling multiple priorities and working to organize them in order to be a more effective tutor. Persevering through stress, prioritizing scheduling and persistent time management were mentioned as important skills by a number of mentors. As N.S. said:

The challenge for me as a tutor is the time I am making for this tutoring day. I am not that strong on being busy and trying to handle things together without being stressed but this time, with this tutoring program, I am trying to handle it. I am busy with the school assignments the past quarter and now, I am trying to organize my time and trying to not be late for the tutoring time.

## ADVOCACY

Mentors developed a better understanding of how at-risk populations are often marginalized, and how this presents significant barriers to becoming more self-determined. By working one-on-one with residents, they learned firsthand that residents rarely fit common stereotypes and often had become “at-risk” only after experiencing a sequence of events that proved beyond their ability to respond and cope financially and with little to no support.

With this understanding, mentors often worked as advocates for the residents, both directly and indirectly. The goal was to lend public visibility to homelessness so that others might come to better understand, like the mentors did, that negative stereotypes were damaging and that they were people with unique stories. As one mentor put it:

The idea that I came up with for my PAR project is a photo journal taken from the perspective of the homeless in and around the Seattle area. I hope that this can bring some attention to the struggles and conditions that the homeless face on a day-to-day basis and have to live with as being normal. I hope to do this in a manner that can show that the homeless in Seattle are humans just like you and I (with dignity) while also bringing attention to their situations.

Developing an understanding of the challenges faced by at-risk populations and a desire to work as an advocate can be a powerful combination moving forward. Mentors who grow this understanding and apply it in their workplaces, their communities, or their daily lives can be instrumental in helping at-risk and marginalized populations be seen a part of society, rather than being treated as an invisible segment of society. One mentor thoughtfully drew out the importance of advocacy in projects by framing his individual PAR project with these critical questions:

Can increasing the voice of and giving better visibility to transitional housing populations help increase their access to and acceptance by the broader community? Would this exposure also help reduce the resistance by communities to construction of new transitional housing communities?

It is our hope that these mentors will use the skills they have acquired and experiences they have

learned from with LIHI residents, along with the critical awareness they have developed to continue their work as advocates for at-risk populations as they move through their careers and their lives.

## CASE STUDIES

### CONNECTING AND NETWORKING: TUESDAYS WITH G.

C.L. was a mentor and student at Seattle Central College; as a single mother in her mid-thirties she was transitioning from working in the cosmetology industry to a career in social services. C.L.'s partner was G., an older woman living in LIHI housing. C.L. described G. as, "a senior citizen who is about seventy years old and has just recently been able to have her own place (in LIHI) this last September after couch surfing since 2000." For the majority of her life, G. was a bus driver for elementary school kids. Unfortunately, late in her career, G. developed diabetes, causing her to lose her job and become dependent on her family. G. always had places to stay, primarily with family members although had consistently experienced periods of homelessness.

G.'s primary self-identified skill-related goal during the program was to learn the basic functionality and capacity of her smartphone. The challenge in teaching G. was that she was struggling with memory problems and was taking medication to help slow the progression of Alzheimer's. In addition, during the program, G.'s main underlying goal was to secure a safe and stable place to live. Her main support during this time was family. In G.'s case, a strong deliverable/outcome was clearly identified: creation of a reference manual for her phone that she would be able to understand and use as a memory aid in connecting with her family and social network. C.L. and G.'s relationship progressed both from the standpoint of developing rapport, and in working toward developing G.'s ability to use her new smartphone to stay in touch with her family and utilize other applications. As C.L. detailed:

I have decided to call our sessions: *Tuesdays with G.* We just had our second session yesterday and I was pleasantly surprised how much she had remembered from our last meeting. She is feeling more comfortable with using her (smart) phone and is able to answer the phone, make calls, search for contacts, add contacts, and use the dial pad.

Yesterday we did an overview of last week's session and then I taught her how to, text, take photos, attach photos and respond to text messages. One of the highlights yesterday was when she texted her daughter M. for the first time. M. responded with an "lol" just because she was so shocked to receive a text from her mother, which made my day. It was so rewarding to see G. excited about being able to communicate through texting, especially because most smartphone users favor texting over calling.

I am noticing that not only is she feeling more confident but that she is emotionally more engaging and it's a good reminder of the power of relationships, on any level, and how fulfilling it is to just talk with someone even if it's for an hour. It's equally essential for seniors to learn how to be digitally literate so that they may continue to stay connected with family, friends and our fast paced world. I think something that comes up for me each time I leave is just how little we take care of our seniors and how that can affect their mental and emotional wellbeing.

As they continued to work together, C.L. noted that G. also developed more confidence:

I am noticing that G. is opening up more to me and is more engaging. She also seems to have more confidence in using her phone. Something that concerns me that could be an obstacle is

that she doesn't use her phone a lot in between our sessions. Some of it is due to not being very active and the other reason she told me is that she gets confused or forgets how to do something, like texting. I am hoping the cheat sheet (created as part of C.L.'s PAR project) I give her will help keep her motivated and confident.

The general goal of the PAR projects was to have mentors work with residents to identify how to best support them in achieving next steps or long-term goals. C.L. had designed her PAR project as a tool to help another of her resident collaborators, R. One of R.'s learning goals was not only to learn how to use a smartphone, but to take advantage of it on an ongoing basis. C.L. noted about midway through the tutoring sessions, "[my] biggest concern is that when our sessions are over there will be no one to practice with (R.) on a weekly basis which could cause her not to be as motivated to use her phone."

In order to best help G. use her phone after her tutoring sessions with C.L. had ended, C.L. provided G. with part of her PAR project, a set of laminated pages that had large visual reminders and screen shots detailing useful functionality. C.L. referred to this as a "cheat sheet" and it was designed to be similar to the laminated, quick access guides for college students. C.L. presented G. the augmented guide in their final meeting. A follow up question would be how the project artifact (the instructional cheat sheet) helped G. to continue to be able to utilize her smartphone's capabilities in supporting her efforts to connect with family and the world at large. In one of her final reflections regarding the program, C.L. said:

When reading the core concepts (of the LIHI/WWU program), I kept thinking of the African proverb, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child.' I think that change and empowerment of individuals are ideal when executed holistically and as a community. In this case the issue is homelessness and prevention, so just providing clothing, food and shelter would be a temporary fix, which would only cause the cycle to start over. But when we participate together as a community such as being a mentor it builds a bridge from homelessness to having a more functional life.

In conclusion, when discussing the qualities of a mentor C.L. summed up one of the core components of the LIHI/WWU mentor/resident partnership by saying:

I think important qualities to possess as a mentor are: the ability to be flexible, empathetic, open-minded and provide guidance that will empower or motivate them to stand strong in who they are. I want to be able to give who I am mentoring the support and encouragement they might need to feel more confident and hopeful about their lives.

## **LEARNING SKILLS FOR EMPLOYMENT AND EMPOWERMENT: BE A PERSON WHO CAN INDEPENDENTLY MANAGE ONESELF**

Mentor GB was originally from Eritrea, and had been living in the US for four years. He had been volunteering in his community since he arrived in the US, and had a strong dedication to improving the lives of others. His desire to work with LIHI came from, "the need to contribute towards the betterment of society with the social and technological skills and knowledge I have."

His resident partner for the quarter, B., was around thirty years old, and also originally from Eritrea. She and her two children had recently come to Seattle from Atlanta, Georgia, moving into a shelter shortly after arriving due to recurring health problems. According to her, "Being homeless means the inability to realize your dreams." Without a safe place to call home, she said, "I could not focus on educating myself and be a person who can independently manage oneself." She was grateful during the program to be

living in a safe and secure residence in a LIHI site where she had access to technology and resources that could help her and her family become more self-determined. Having a safe and secure place to live allowed B. to use these resources to build a better future for herself. B. had a fair amount of experience with technology, but wanted to become more knowledgeable about software programs which would specifically help her get a job in bookkeeping which she hoped would lead to a fulfilling job. Therefore, the PAR project GB and B. created was a short reference guide with resources that would help B. with her bookkeeping skill building and maintenance in the future.

Throughout their mentoring, GB was able to get a better understanding of the societal issues that lead to homelessness, and the obstacles that often stand in the way of at-risk populations finding stability and self-determination. He said: “I learned a lot about the issue of homelessness and how we can make and impact helping these people.” By tutoring B. in how to effectively use and utilize technology, he learned how to help people help themselves. He said, “B. is improving in terms of the technology knowledge and its application such as use of computer, Internet, application support, and typing.”

In working with GB, B. became more comfortable using the Internet to find information about her career goals and compile information about it. In the future, she planned to continue to efficiently navigate digital resources to find information about her business. She planned to become certified in using QuickBooks (an industry standard digital accounting and bookkeeping tool) and to continue learning about and utilizing the Internet to find jobs in her area. Learning how to use these resources helped her become more confident in herself and her ability to use the new technology. Digital literacy then, for B., was an invaluable skill that she hoped would continue to empower her self-determination for years to come.

### **CONFIDENCE & SEEKING KNOWLEDGE: TO LEARN DIGITAL ETIQUETTE, COMMUNICATION, [AND] LITERACY**

Mentor LN was a student at Seattle Central College, and was born and raised in Tanzania. She was pursuing a B.A. in social work, and had a passion for helping others. She entered the program to get a better understanding of the issues people in low income housing face, and to learn how she could be a part of the solution in helping people find permanent housing opportunities.

LN’s partner was LE, a man in his sixties living in low-income apartments in Ballard, Washington. He was born in Cleveland and moved to Washington many years ago to work in a factory. Although he became homeless ten years ago, he liked living in Washington. He had four children (only one of whom lived nearby) and used social media to communicate with them. His community of close personal connections was relatively small, limited to the few people he saw on a regular basis. Becoming more confident and gaining more digital literacy navigational skills would allow him to expand his circle of connections, and help him learn about things that interested him.

Although he was already using Facebook, he wasn’t sure about some of the functions and was not confident using the application. At times, he felt frustrated by his lack of understanding and didn’t know where to find resources that could help him learn about the computer or social media. To help LE, the PAR project LN created with him was a reference guide that showed him how to use different features of Facebook, and showed him how to save documents and create folders using the graphical interface and basic functionality of a computer file system.

LN was surprised by how limiting a lack of digital literacy can be. She said that, “the key to functioning in today’s society while using the Internet is to learn digital etiquette, communication, literacy.” Without these things, LN felt she wouldn’t be as strongly connected to her community, and wouldn’t have had

access to many of the resources that had helped her to be successful. She learned both the importance of digital literacy learning and knowledge sharing, and how important it is to approach those who aren't as comfortable with technology in a respectful and open manner.

After several sessions, LE became more and more confident in using the basic functions of a computer and social media. According to LN:

Every time when I went back for the visit he was eager to show me the things he learned a week before. I can see from his reaction while he showing me. He felt confident while he was showing the topic he learned. Not only could he use these important technological tools, he was confident and proud of his ability to do so.

After becoming more confident in his ability to use the Internet, he wanted to use other digital tools to learn about different topics that were interesting to him. LN was able to find free online classes for LE about business so that he could go through them on his own and continue learning. Being confident in using the computer allowed LE to expand his knowledge in ways that he never thought would have been possible before and he was able to comfortably find further digitally retrieved resources for himself. Moving forward, he will be able to use social media to connect with people, and expand on the small circle of people with which he communicates, shares, and networks.

## **DISCUSSION—CONNECTING DIGITAL LITERACY WITH SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR AT RISK POPULATIONS**

The LIHI/WWU Mentoring Project provided an experiential learning program for both mentors and residents. Though the project certainly faced challenges, the WWU/LIHI team, volunteer mentors, and resident learners worked together to overcome them, ultimately fostering a learning experience that continually improved as the program progressed.

Mentors described developing a better understanding of the causes of homelessness, became familiar with the benefits of transitional housing or permanent supportive housing, broke down stereotypes they had regarding the homeless, and became familiar with strategies to assist residents of the LIHI community, especially around digital literacy.

The residents benefitted by growing their digital literacy skills, including basic use of the Internet, web-based applications, emailing, social media, and digital communications. This digital awareness led one resident to deploy her new skills in entrepreneurship as she founded and began operating a small bookkeeping business. The residents will be able to use these skills to gain better access to support services, advocate for themselves, seek jobs, and stay better connected with friends and family.

Often the most important part of the mentor-resident interaction is simply the interpersonal attention and support provided by the weekly tutoring sessions. If a person or family has been faced with many societal obstacles, and become homeless they can become discouraged and isolated, and are in this sense, "at risk." The fact that the mentors took an interest in the residents' lives and attended to their futures by assisting with learning new skills, or providing words of encouragement greatly assisted them in overcoming some basic challenges and helped them become more empowered as they moved forward in their work and lives.

Yet more qualitative benefits of the program for at-risk populations, and to the mentors themselves, have been observed, though they may be more difficult to assess. These general benefits are equally important. For instance, the results of experiential work simultaneously breaks down negative stereotypes of those at-risk and fosters a familiarity and interest on the part of participating mentors to commit to continued work with marginalized populations in their communities. This became clear in conversations with mentors after they finished the program with many continuing this work in their careers and studies. One mentor said, “Serving the underrepresented and needy as a medical professional has been my dream ever since I graduated.” These residual aftereffects of the program shouldn’t be underestimated. Moreover, the social afterlife of helping the at-risk become more self-determined could have visible and measurable effects in society at large in terms of building social capital for those who are at-risk, that is, their connections and relations within their communities.

It is our hope that benefits offered by this program not only serve to assist those who participated, both residents and mentors alike, but in the near-term worked to help overcome the challenges civil society at large faces in supporting at-risk populations in becoming more self-determined. In the longer-term, we hope this program offered support toward improved quality of life for both mentors and residents, and better understandings in general about the importance of digital literacy programming for marginalized groups in communities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

Based on the themes and conclusion of the report, we developed the following practical and policy recommendations toward improving the depth and breadth of the partnership success and general quality of resident and mentor experiences:

### **BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH DEPLOYING THE CULTURAL COMPETENCE OF GENERATIONS OF DIVERSE RESIDENTS AND MENTORS**

Sustaining the lessons learned through cohorts of diverse mentors and residents working together can improve the overall quality of the program, especially its level of cultural competence. However translating these lessons from one year to the next requires consistent leadership and coordination with which community-based organizations often struggle due to lack of resources and year-to-year contingency funding plans with donors and the city. AmeriCorps and Vista volunteers have been important in filling staffing, but these groups are not often reliable long-term sources of labor. Therefore, having staff who are experienced, skilled and have previously been mentors or resident learners employed to recruit, mentor, and transfer “insider” knowledge to subsequent cohorts would be important for sustaining and expanding on the quality of the program and enriching the level of diversity from one year to the next.

Additionally, credibility and leadership is part of the fundamental structure of ongoing organizational health when mentors and residents can use their experiential knowledge to support the next generation. The importance of collaborations and persistence, not just in the mentor-resident pairs, but also in the overall partnership of the organization, are evidence of a growing and developing project, working in meaningful ways to make a lasting difference in the community.

### **POLICIES IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL ACCESS POINTS**

One major barrier for residents in establishing their long-term goals were obstacles related to accessing

institutions that could otherwise support their persistence in learning, working, and gaining information and referrals as well as resources. But this also means accessing jobs, and to this end, career services. City policies should consider easier entry points to those who are the most marginalized for access to these public services, particularly by making these more people-friendly, not only technology-based. Libraries, for example, have much career building and referral networking information, as well as educational services such as one-on-one technology learning that could support residents to continue their digital learning after they graduate from LIHI. Moreover, they have English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, citizenship classes, and conversation and listening groups like Talk Time that could attract and motivate this population. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to create more satellite services linked to community-based organizations so that LIHI could support residents' easy access to numerous close-at-hand resources.

## CONSISTENT FUNDING

A program such as this requires reliable perpetual operating resources, beyond precarious year-to-year funding. At least a three-year operating window, with yearly performance criteria is recommended. If criteria and benchmarks are met, funding moves forward through each renewable window. Budget considerations and limitations are understood but project team members and leadership only learn how to best operate the program after experience, through a number of years.

It is hard to assess and improve a program that is only funded in one-year increments. Ad hoc assessment is possible, but there is little sustained organizational motivation to improve and plan for the future. It is much more difficult to put the necessary effort into a program that, by design, has no reliable future.

If year-by-year funding is the only funding available, the program should be engage ongoing *research and evaluation* in the sense that a main goal of the program would be to collect information for use in additional ways, as well as an ongoing social program designed to benefit mentors and residents. It should be enlarged and integrated with other homeless reforms in Seattle to benefit the entire community.

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