More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism

By Graig R. Meyer and George W. Noblit
A Volume in Perspectives on Mentoring—Frances Kochan, Series Editor

Reviewed By Aneta H. Walker, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership, University of West Florida

More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism is the ninth volume in a series on Mentoring Perspective that provides a riveting account on how the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program (BRMA) embarked on a journey to combat institutional racism and lack of racial equity through a hybrid school-community mentoring model. BRMA was conceptualized from a commissioned Blue Ribbon Task Force by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro School Board as an educational reform and best practice for improving African American student achievement. The authors Meyer and Noblit (2018) describe the core concepts within the book through unique personal experiences and reflections across 20+ years of their active involvement in the program. This style of presentation engages the reader in a prolific journey from the 1993 inception of BRMA through the challenges of continuous program improvement in efforts to battle ever present racism which plagues and persists in schools today. Each chapter in this book builds on the prior concepts that center around key points and thought processes which are considered the fundamental elements to the BRMA program.

The opening chapter, "More than a mentoring program", begins with Graig Meyer's tumultuous personal story from his arrival at BRMA in 1998. Meyer elaborates on many early lessons learned. The profound revelation of how important developing relationships among the Black elders and parents came from black school board member, Elizabeth Mason Carter, affectionately addressed in the book as Liz, his mentor. "The most important lesson that she shared was that I needed to shut up and listen" (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p.5). Systemic advocacy, which portrays the basis of African American collectivism, and tackling institutional racism, became focal points for BRMA through the influential work with Glen Singleton. When the dominant narrative in our society continually supports inequality and marginalization, a counternarrative is necessary for people to understand, navigate, and change that system. Meyer's goal for this book is to establish the need for a counternarrative when dealing with issues surrounding systemic inequality. He suggests "… you cannot address a racially identifiable problem such as the achievement gap with talking directly and consistently about race" (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p. 10). The story behind BRMA is the counternarrative.

Chapter 2 opens with a powerful scenario illuminating the impact a mentoring relationship has on the identified student, mentor, and community as a whole. BRMA is comprehensive support program for students beginning in grade 4 through postsecondary education. Identifying the strengths of students and matching those of the mentors for longitudinal success is the vital component of the program. "Ninety percent of the program's mentoring relationships have lasted longer than 2 years, and just over 60% of the program's graduates have had the same mentor from fourth grade all the way through high school" (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p. 15). Core components of mentoring, advocacy, and family engagement are the foundation of BRMA. However, the program moves beyond individual student support by employing strategies that involve systemic advocacy and family engagement. The signature success for BRMA is the mentor match; however, student supports are enhanced through an academic component, social and cultural enrichment, college and career exposure, and leadership development. Some elements within the program such as the duration of relationships, small cohort size, and not emphasizing achievement outcomes address BRMA vision and contribute to disrupting institutional racism. At the end of the chapter 2, the authors list compelling measures of success as well as viable critiques of BRMA. Lastly, promoting program engagement is a vital factor for BRMA to counter the greatest dilemma of dismissing students from the program.

At the heart of the book *More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism* and the core philosophical choice of BRMA, is being an antiracist program to create racial equity for marginalized groups of students. The following two chapters delve into the key aspect and greatest strength implemented in BRMA, mentoring relationships, which has enabled the creation of an antiracist model for mentoring youth. The BRMA model requires a two-year commitment from selected mentors. During this two-year span, BRMA invests in the development and support for the mentor through an intensive pre-service orientation, continued focused trainings, and coaching mentors in relationship building that lasts up to two full years. In addition, all mentors use weekly online reflection logs which are read and responded to by the program staff. Students receive training to learn about what it means to be and have a mentor. To further assist students and mentors, the BRMA staff is well trained in

handling and responding to specific needs of students that are outside the realm of mentoring responsibilities.
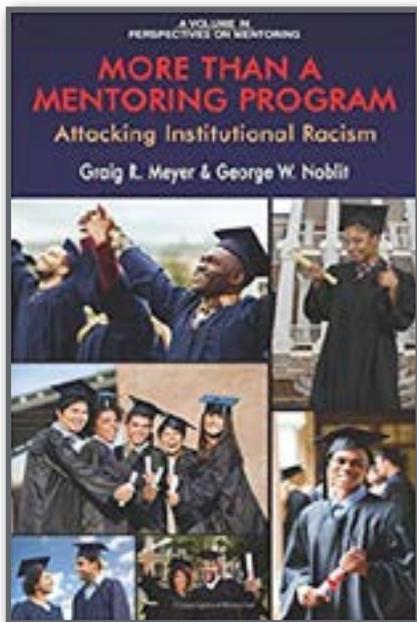
Going beyond the mentoring program, the ideas discussed in chapter 4 address how to enhance the effects of mentoring. To accomplish this goal, BRMA developed a set of "enrichment components" to expand program impact and broaden the scope of the mentor's work past the idea of cultural assimilation (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, pp.39-40). Academic support conducted through two types of tutoring. Volunteers are placed at school to tutor students during study periods or before/after school hours or they can participate in the twice-weekly evening tutorial at established local community centers. Students that have persistent academic problems receive individualized assistance with an academic support specialist. To increase social and cultural awareness, the annual calendar events have monthly scheduled activities for students. These activities range from athletic venues, art, performances, or visiting historical sites. BRMA places a heavy emphasis on college and career exposure. Mentors are asked to incorporate one activity on a college campus each year. Leadership development is experienced through the Youth Leadership Institute program. Finally, the annual participation summit is a celebration and planning event for all staff, students, family members and mentors. This event can be described as a combination of pep rally, community education, and match check-in that serves as a self-assessment that gages student, parent, and mentor participation. Additional incentives are provided for students who were on the academic honor roll.

"Don't be a statistic" (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p. 60). This powerful saying is the center of conversation in chapter 5 concerning marginalized students being subjected to institutional racism. As a proclaimed antiracist program, BRMA has taken on significant strategies to supplement what mentors do to help students of color navigate social systems. One such program to support the development of a student's racial identity is "Seeking the Self" summer camp and year-round programming. The conceptual model of the program was created using Noblit's 2009 research in which he used the critical race theory (CRT) and research on the impact of arts education. The BRMA staff created a curriculum that teaches the fundamentals of CRT through arts-based programming. In addition, professional development was designed for educators to help support students with their racial identity and guidance around addressing the counternarrative to counter institutional racism.

There is a delicate balance of students' needs and funders' expectations in programs such as BRMA must operate. It is evident that with an antiracist program like BRMA, these issues may not align 100% with those of the funders such as a school system. In chapter 6, Meyer discusses the efforts BRMA took to remain student-centered. One key character that truly impacted the program to reflect and re-center the focus from mentors to students was Marta Sanchez. Marta was a Mexican American Ph.D. student that strengthened the work being done with the growing Latino populations. Meyer shares multiple stories where Marta passionately impacted the program and shifted the focus back on students. One noteworthy story was during the planning session of the Participation and Evolution Summit. Meyer was rehearsing his speech in front of the whole staff and Marta prompted him that he had to remind parents that the major shift in BRMA wasn't about the program or mentors' needs but about the students. Another powerful story was concerning a high needs student named Kobe. Kobe's hearing and dismissal story illuminates the need for programs like BRMA to develop relationships internally with schools and districts where you are trying to make an impact. The type of student-centered advocacy that BRMA used illustrates how they attacked institutional racism on a systemic level.

Systemic advocacy is considered a push for "equity" and an attempt to change policies and practices in which institutional racism is embedded. One of the most powerful strategies to improve system advocacy that BRMA implemented was the Students' Six. The Students' Six was plethora of professional development strategies to help teachers become culturally competent in the classroom. What made this so powerful was the fact students were teaching teachers how to teach. Students' Six strategies revolved around the following: visibility, proximity, connecting to students' lives, engaging students' culture, addressing race, and connection to future selves (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p. 96). These strategies were collectively developed with Meyer and educational consultants, author Bonnie Davis, and Director of Desegregation in Clayton Missouri, Dorothy Kelly. With the help of Blue Ribbon Academic Support Specialist, Teresa Bunner they turned the project into powerful conversations and professional development opportunities for the school district. Its success spawned the creation of a Master Teacher Cohort program that met seven times a year and was almost totally student directed. A continued focus on systemic advocacy led to the formation of Parent University for BRMA to leverage greater

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systemic change. Lastly, BRMA partnered with other advocacy agencies like, The Adelante Education Coalition, to have a greater impact on systemic change beyond the school district level.

The nuts and bolts of the BRMA are discussed in chapter 8, "Leadership and Staffing". It is evident that effective and sustained leadership were the foundation for the program's overall and lengthy success. Meyer was hired in 1998 and remained the program coordinator until 2014. Lorie Clark was hired in 2002 and is currently working in the program today. Each of the two leaders provide detailed reflections of how important shared leadership, collaboration, and concern for racism's impact on the community were keys for program success and longevity. Their reflections describe how they impacted the program with hiring, planning, and handling issues that arose during their tenure and work together. As with any organization, turnover was an issue, but budgetary mandates and restrictions limited the number of staff and provided for six full time personnel. In addition, Meyer points out the importance of professional development and learning requirements for the staff.

Program evaluation and continuous improvement are the framework of chapter 9. Meyer (2018) contends that BRMA established a culture of continuous improvement through the deliberate engagement of the staff in all areas of the program. To illustrate, he reflected on a debriefing session concerning an external evaluation of "Seeking the Self" program, "…the moment of celebration was suddenly over. I was surprised. The conversations quickly shifted to what needed to be done next. It addressed "Seeking the Self" but also ranged broadly across connections to other program elements. This discussion brought the staff to the edges of their chairs. They were all in" (p.138). The mechanics and processes BRMA implemented for recruiting, managing,mentor-mentee matching, supporting and coaching mentors, and ending mentoring relationships. Meyers reminds the reader not only is selecting, training, and supporting mentors an important part of program success, but the mentor-mentee match is at the core of BRMA's efforts to be strengths-based for youth mentoring. Students are identified in grade 4 by social workers with input from a school based team. Once a student is accepted into the program, the family is notified and attends an orientation meeting that explains BRMA expectations. The student and family meet the matched mentor in a home visit facilitated by the referring social worker. The program has about two-thirds of its funding through private sources and the remaining comes from the school district partnership. It is evident that relationships and communications are integral factors in the program's enduring success. To validate the program's effectiveness and its impact on student success, a rigorous external evaluation was conducted by University of North Carolina led by George Noblit in 2011. Based on the results, BRMA is "an important asset to CHCCS. It is highly effective for youth and their families and provides CHCCS with a conduit to families that have been traditionally hard

for the schools to serve well" (Meyer & Noblit, 2018, p. 162).

The well documented impacts of the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate paradigm are impressive. The framework the BRMA has established and transformed the field of youth mentoring in important ways, especially the focused attention on how race and institutional racism affect the student outcomes. Chapter 10 acknowledges the fact that even though the program has experienced great success there is still much to do to conquer institutional racism and provide systemic change for marginalized groups of students. The authors, Meyer and Noblit, deliberate the shortfalls and dilemmas that impeded BRMA's progress along the way. In closing, nine considerations are provided for future programs to explore for the field of youth mentoring and positively impacting institutional racism through systemic advocacy.

As a former K-12 administrator, this book provides a framework of hope in addressing some fundamental root causes of achievement gaps within marginalized student groups. Talking about racism is uncomfortable and one that most educators would rather ignore and not discuss so it will just go away. This mentality of if we don't discuss it then it must not exist. The book *More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism* forces the reader to realize that refusing to address policies and procedures that perpetuate systemic racism is the problem. Clearly, as educators, especially in k-12 settings must begin to have candid conversations about the impacts institutional racism have on our students and where we begin to address racism. The story behind the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program is compelling and full of promising insights for schools desiring change through youth mentoring and student advocacy.

As an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership department, this book spoke volumes on the need to start conversations with aspiring leaders about institutional racism and ways to employ systemic advocacy for change. The Blue Ribbon Mentoring-Advocate was an external program that worked collectively with the school system to support marginalized students. At the end of each chapter, there are guiding and thought provoking questions about the content discussed within each chapter. These questions can be used as a platform and springboard to begin conversations about the impact mentoring, student advocacy, and antiracist programs can have on our youth.

Finally, *More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism* is an important contribution to the field of effective youth mentoring and student advocacy. The book illuminates the need to engage researchers, higher education, K-12 administrators, teachers, and parents in challenging conversations about race, racial identity, and institutional racism to improve our educational system. These hard deliberations must result in productive solutions for systemic change for disenfranchised students. Truly, More Than a Mentoring Program: Attacking Institutional Racism is more than a book about a youth mentoring program and more about the need for radical change for the success and future of our students.