

Agnese Nelms Haury

Program in Environment and Social Justice

Project SOAR (Student Outreach for Access & Resiliency)

Project SOAR connects undergraduate mentors with middle school students in under-resourced Tucson schools. Mentors meet 1-on-1 or with a small group of middle school youth each week throughout the semester, addressing topics including academic strengths, self-esteem, conflict resolution, career exploration, and the college search process. Mentors meet in a weekly class to discuss issues related to college access, social justice, and mentoring techniques/strategies.

College	College of Education
Associated courses	HED 350 (fall) or HED 397B (spring)
Credit	Yes
Project initiated by	Jenny Lee, Arizona professor of educational policy studies and practice, College of Education
Faculty and/or Advisor(s)	Mary Irwin, College of Education
Community partner(s)	Schools in Tucson Unified School District, Sunnyside School District and a local Charter School
University partner(s)	n/a
# of students reached each year	125+
Funding	College of Education
Evaluation	Reflective, for grade



Student Engagement
& Career Development

“I Became More of Myself”

Project SOAR connects Arizona students with middle schoolers for meaningful mentoring

By Kimi Eisele

Once a week for a semester, Jayleen Nicole Vega, a speech and hearing sciences major at the University of Arizona, went to Mansfeld Middle School, not far from campus, to meet with two seventh graders and an eighth grader, all girls. She worked with them to make dream boards to make visible their hopes and plans for their future.

“We would talk about school and take time to gather pictures of things we wanted in our future. I would ask them about college,” she said.

One of the students “wanted to go to UCLA, open her own beauty business,” Vega recalled. Her dream board was full of images of hair and nails and she told Vega, “I want to be rich and have a gold Lamborghini.”

The weekly visits were part of Vega’s participation in Project SOAR, a campus program that pairs undergraduate students with middle school students from one of 12 Tucson middle schools.

Each semester, between 50 and 100 undergraduates sign up to participate by enrolling in HED 350 (fall) or HED 397B (spring), a 2-3 credit course in the College of Education. The course

includes a weekly lecture as well as a discussion section, where students share experiences throughout the semester and trade ideas for activities and reflecting on their experience.

Mentors come from all colleges and majors. “In class we have fine arts students next to engineering students,” said Mary Irwin, assistant professor of practice at Center for The Study of Higher Education Director and the director of Project SOAR.

Project SOAR mentors are assigned one to four middle school students, who are identified by teachers and counselors at the middle schools. “Usually it’s kids who need extra encouragement or someone with potential who’s not reaching it,” Irwin said.

Arizona professor of educational policy studies and practice Jenny Lee developed Project SOAR.

At first it targeted high school students, but was adjusted to serve middle school students, “when you could really make an impact to get them to think ahead about college,” Irwin said.

“These are true mentoring relationships, in which they’re

talking about the college process and what it's like to be in college," she said.

Mentors tend to be students who "want to make a difference," Irwin said. "They are often the helper type. They come in with that personality."

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Aaron Joen Leor, a senior in microbiology, mentored students during his junior year. "I feel like this program is good for students who want to make an impact on other people's lives. It helps if they're very outgoing as well as creative because you're in charge of the schedule, you decide what you do with your mentees, and have to be open to what they want," he said.

Vega said she signed up for the program because she has always enjoyed working with kids.

"Growing up I always kind of knew what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go," she said. "I knew these kids probably need help, and once I met them, I saw that some were struggling in their classes. I really wanted to see them be successful."

The classroom exchanges helped her come up with activities. "It didn't take a lot out of me. It wasn't that hard," she said.

Reframing deficits

In addition to giving students time to reflect on their experiences and exchange ideas for lesson plans, the class also covers issues related to college access for underserved populations, academic and financial challenges for under-resourced schools and how that affects families and students.

Irwin said some Arizona students face a learning curve when it comes to issues of equity in education. "There can be a lot of struggles for students who have no experience with this, so it's important to have resources for them. Mostly it's learning through the process," she said.

Some students struggle with "deficit perspectives," Irwin says. In recent years, she shifted the curriculum to incorporate broader lessons about social justice. "It's not always that 'their parents don't care,' but that they are working more than one job and are stretched thin," for instance. It's important for Arizona mentors to understand those realities.

Alma Carmona, principal of CE Rose Middle School, says role models are important for middle school kids. "One of the things our students really thrive on is

that connection. Not all of the students have a connection with adults that are able to mentor them about future aspirations and goal setting," Carmona said.

But it's not just about goals. While mentors model responsibility and follow through, they also give students opportunities for play and friendship. One Arizona mentor who loved sports would shoot hoops with his mentees. Another worked with a student who wanted to be a rapper, helping him create a rap poem then record it.

Carmona said only on a few occasions have the mentorships faltered. That was primarily due to mentors having difficulty getting to the school and not being consistent. "We try to explain to Arizona students that our students are depending on them. They have a lot of people in their life that don't follow through, so that consistency is important," Carmona said.

Julie Wanat, who works at Dietz Middle School, agrees that consistency is essential to the program. "You want to make sure the mentors are committed to arriving." That's important, she says, because "a lot of these middle school students don't have the consistency in their lives. You can have a houseful of people but still not be heard. You could be the only person taking notice about what comes out of their mouth. What these Arizona mentors do is provide that conversation."

Wanat says she works to make it as positive an experience as she can for the Arizona mentors. Sometimes she finds herself offering care to them, as well. “I now know the look. They come in and they have the look. I have snacks. I can feed them during their emotional times. I say shut the door. Maybe they need a moment to just sit down. I give back to them by giving them a little time. They are under a lot of pressure.”

She said some Arizona students have returned for their mentees’ promotions and in some cases have met mentees’ parents. She’s even had some of her middle school students come back to be SOAR mentors. “They understood the need for time and attention.”

“Being able to interact with a college student is huge. So many of our families haven’t graduated from high school or middle school, or just have limited education.”

Finding perfect matches

Wanat says finding the right match between Arizona student and elementary or middle school student is also important. She remembers one Arizona senior

who returned the last week of school with a Bob Ross wig on and had students paint with them. He came back the week after he graduated with In-and-Out Burgers. “When they leave, I want them to be a little sad at leaving the kids,” she said.

Peggy Solis, who works with graduate and family support at Imago Dei Middle School, which hosts four to twelve Arizona mentors each semester, agrees. She recalls when a Arizona communications major interested in fashion design was paired with a seventh grader who loved fashion. “We put them together and it was just a love fest. They were perfect.”

At Imago Dei, Arizona mentors attend an orientation at the start of their term to prepare mentors about the school and its demographics. While Imago Dei is technically a private school, many families depend on Arizona state tax credits to help offset tuitions. Some families don’t pay anything for tuition and can use scholarships.

Solis says interacting with Arizona mentors has a significant impact on the children. “Being able to interact with a college student is huge. So many of our families haven’t graduated from high school or middle school, or just have limited education.”

While the majority of students are Latino or African American, Solis finds it’s meaningful when they interact with mentors who

are from different cultures than their own. Once, a sixth grader was matched with a Chinese student who was still learning English. “The interaction was so good because the student was so curious. He loved drawing and connected with our students through anime.”

In the orientation, Solis also includes information about safety and what mentors should look out for in case one of their students shows signs of distress. “If something doesn’t seem right, we tell them to come talk to us.”

Looking back on a day’s work is also important to the mentors’ experience, Irwin said. Self-reflection is the basis for how Arizona students in the program are evaluated.

Currently the program’s impact is measured mostly by schools’ willingness to continue with it. There has been no longitudinal research about the program and how the mentorships might impact both middle school and Arizona students over the long term.

Vega isn’t sure she can accurately gauge her impact on the middle school students she mentors. What she can measure, however, is how the program impacted her. “I transformed. I became more of myself. Because I let them know who I was while I was also getting to know them.”