

# Project Cygnet

Sarah Dickerson 22 April 2015

With the dropout rate for high school students in Lancaster City School District still higher than the state's average, advocates for involving students in after-school programming saw an opportunity for improvement (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). The implementation of after-school programming that emphasizes the students' potential for academic success shows students that they have the option to not be part of that statistic. A. J. Ortiz is an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer who is coordinating a volunteer initiative called Project Cygnet. The project's mission is to "alleviate poverty by increasing children's academic achievement (Millersville University, n.d.). Facilitating partnerships between after-school programs such as The Mix at Arbor Place and Attollo with Millersville University students gives the students of Lancaster City the opportunity to see college as an option through the mentoring influences of the Millersville University student volunteers.

Last year, Project Cygnet efforts helped more than 200 kids, with 83% of those served improving in their core subject areas and/or scoring proficient on the PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams) (Millersville University, n.d.). A substantial 92% of the

students who received help had increased academic engagement with the help of more than 80 Millersville University students who volunteered (Millersville University, n.d.).

AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers like Ortiz serve one year at a host site to build capacity in a program that aims to eradicate some of the challenges of living in poverty in their community. Ortiz originally expected to work with SWAN, which stands for "Scaling Walls a Note at a Time" and is a program for students in the Lancaster City School District who have incarcerated parents (<http://www.swan4kids.org/>). SWAN uses music to challenge the students to develop confidence by developing skills as musicians; A musician himself, Ortiz was looking forward to this opportunity. Unfortunately, since SWAN is going through a transition period in which they are trying to gain financial support to move their programs into the public school system, Ortiz's expected partnership was put on hold. While he was at first disappointed, Ortiz found satisfaction in his new partnerships with The Mix at Arbor Place and Attollo, explaining that the missions of these organizations remains in line with his desired outcomes from his new position (personal communication, January 6, 2015).

The problem facing students in the Lancaster City School District is a high dropout rate that suggests that students do not feel like they can be successful in an academic setting. To address this, the after-school programs for

which Millersville students volunteer provide the students with role models who try to motivate the kids to see that education is important. In addition to meeting the basic needs of children living in poverty, A. J. Ortiz sees the education components of his partner programs as “the best place to start when you are trying to fight poverty” because education gives the means to achieve class mobility in a class-based society (personal communication, January 6, 2015). As an undergraduate student at Millersville University, Ortiz spent time volunteering at the local Boys and Girls Club, where he reinforced the children’s potential in efforts to combat academic disengagement. While they are likely to have the same reinforcement of their potential with other activities, this model of using academic-based programs makes the skills readily translatable to the classroom, explained Ortiz (personal communication, January 6, 2015).

The Mix at Arbor Place, located in southeast Lancaster, is an after-school program that serves approximately 100 students a day, Monday through Thursday. The staff members who run the programs are committed and well trained to provide their volunteers with very clear expectations, which translates to good volunteer experiences. This component of the programming places it in the bounds of the consensus for best practices for after-school programming in which experienced, committed staff plays a vital role in student success

(Huang, & Dietel, 2011).

While the emphasis of their work is on the students who attend the after-school programming, The Mix at Arbor Place is also open to working with students' families as well as others in the community. Ortiz recalled a recent event in which Millersville University students took donated books to the Mix at Arbor Place to read to the students and allowed them to take the books home to their families. Activities like this emphasize The Mix at Arbor Place's commitment to working with the community to offer the students the best experience possible. After-school programs include subjects like cooking, art, writing and computer instruction, which gives the university volunteers the opportunity to help in ways that best suit their skill sets. Ortiz suggested that the presence of the Millersville students does more than give the Lancaster City students help with their homework, explaining that when the kids interact with the university students, they can see, some for the first time, that college is an option for them too (personal communication, January 6, 2015).

Ortiz's VISTA Project Cygnet also helped him develop a strong partnership with Attollo, which is part of the Children Deserve a Change Foundation. Attollo's mission is to show children and youth that college is an option through their college preparation programming. Students recruited from the local area engage in personal discipline-based activities to prepare themselves for post-secondary education success. The variety of academic

activities in which students engage allows them to explore their own interests and skill sets, which is a vital component of effective after-school programming according to documented after-school programming research (Portland Children's Levy. (n.d.). Attollo's website shares that 90% of its scholars attend a four-year education institution (<http://www.attolloprep.org/>). The preparation for this great achievement includes 100% of their students visiting six top-performing colleges or universities (<http://www.attolloprep.org/>). Approximately 40 students engage in the program on a regular basis, and the reduced size compared with that of The Mix at Arbor Place allows for personal attention for each of the Attollo scholars. Ortiz explained that his volunteers provide homework help to the students, which gives them valuable education-building experience.

While both of the community partners Ortiz focused on operate under models that are similar to those adapted by most after-school programs, he explained that the enthusiasm and consistency of both the program structure and staff make collaboration with these partners easy. More importantly, they create a fun and consistent environment in which the Lancaster City students can grow and thrive.

Since these programs are running so well in Lancaster City, are they as likely to be successful in your area? Ortiz thinks yes if you create the proper structure. He explains that you first need an anchor institution such as a

university or a network of churches. The “anchor” refers to the resources, both financial and human capital, that the institution provides to the project. Then, the development of the specifics of your program should reflect the needs of the school district you wish to serve. The school representative needs to define the problem and then brainstorm ways that the anchor institution can help. Representatives from a school district know what their students need, so it is as simple as asking.

After-school programs increase retention and engagement, not only for the students served but also for the students who are serving. This symbiotic relationship between the groups of students provides experiential learning opportunities for the mentoring students, helping them with both personal and professional development while helping others. In essence, a university is able to increase the engagement of its students in their communities through education practices.

## References

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## **Author Biography**

**Sarah Dickerson is a 2013 graduate of Susquehanna University with a BA in English and philosophy. She serves as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer at her alma mater, coordinating a food access program and running the campus garden. Ms. Dickerson loves literature and plans to earn her PhD and teach at a university.**