

CREATING “*BE AUTHENTIC*”: EVALUATING THE EFFECTS
OF MENTORING ON COLLEGE MINDSET
IN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

Be Authentic

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Education
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

December 10, 2018

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ABSTRACT

As a first generation college student, I struggled to balance academics, my job, and parenting. Fortunately, I grew up with several mentors who gave me the resources and courage to continue to college. The importance of mentoring can be overlooked in adolescent lives, and I wanted to bring awareness and provide support.

I created an organization called *Be Authentic* that provides high school girls career and/or college preparation, professional skill development and helps participants build positive self-worth. *Be Authentic* endeavors to create the environment I had that led to success in college. I am conducting an empirical evaluation to test how mentoring contributes to the college mindset of female adolescents.

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It was three o'clock in the afternoon and I had just left my high school. It took only five minutes to walk from school to my apartment, but that was not my destination. I intended to walk right on by, but my mom happened to be standing outside our doorway. I stopped, and we got into an angry confrontation. By the time it was over my hand was bloody from punching our living room window. I left and continued with my plan. I kept walking until I reached the shoulder of the busy highway next to the apartments. The day was sunny, but not so warm that you could actually feel it on your skin. I could feel intermittent gusts of wind as cars, trucks, and motorcycles zoomed past me. I was nervous because I knew I was about to walk into moving traffic, and it was going to hurt. But that was the goal. To take my life.

Obviously I am still here, writing this paper for my Honors project and preparing to enter a master's program in school psychology. There are two reasons why: Felix and Cindy Cervantez. When they saw the distraught 15-year-old girl standing on the side of the road, they pulled over in their silver PT Cruiser and Cindy got out of the car. She positioned herself next to me. I wouldn't look at her. I didn't know this lady. She kept standing there, awkwardly, in silence. I wanted to be rude to her. "What do you want?" I asked. "I don't want anything", she replied. "I was wondering what you're doing here." I never told her what I was doing on the side of the road, but she knew. She wouldn't let me push her away. "I used to be you", she said. "Trust me, this is not going to fix what you expect it to fix. If you come with us, we can talk about it." It took some convincing, but I ended up sitting with them at a table at Starbucks. In the past eight years, we have shared many more tables, including last week at Thanksgiving. These people saved my life.

The opportunities I have been awarded and the successes I have accomplished are owed to mentors and influential leaders like Felix and Cindy. At various points in my life teachers,

church members, and neighbors encouraged me, counseled me, and offered practical help. However, growing up there were no programs in any school I attended that paired me with someone who could focus on my academic and professional potential. I wish there had been a person to help me build my résumé, assist with college applications, show me how to search and apply for scholarships, provide SAT preparation resources, and give tips on interviewing and professional dress. This kind of help would have made a big difference for me.

The population of diverse students at TCU is less than 20%. When I talk with other students of color, I hear stories similar to my own. There is not a minority student who I have spoken with at TCU who did not have an influential leader in their life helping them to get where they are today. These students have also noticed the dearth of mentoring programs offered on and around campus for underrepresented high school students. They also wish they had a program to support them and encourage them on their path to college. Recognizing the scope of the problem inspired me to become a solution. With this acknowledged need in mind, I created a mentoring program called *Be Authentic* for high school female students.

Be Authentic

Developing *Be Authentic*

My mentoring program is called *Be Authentic* because I wanted the foundation of my organization to be self-worth and self-advocacy. I began with two *a priori* assumptions: (1) when adolescents receive moral support and encouragement, their drive to achieve is heightened, and (2) when adolescents have a reliable, influential role model they can relate to, it provides motivation to strive for the best. I chose my target audience to be 9th through 12th grade female students because I was using my own experience as a model, and I could relate to them. Keeping

my own experiences and the experiences of other minority students I know in mind, I began developing my program around five goals:

1. Inspire and motivate teen girls
2. Provide community service experience through hosting community outreach events
3. Instill leadership skills and professional etiquette
4. Provide access to college preparation material and assistance
5. Promote high self-worth with an emphasis on self-advocacy

There were two main parts to my planning the program: structuring the organization, and the spiritual journey. The spiritual journey was about me helping them discover each of their unique interests and encouraging them and supporting them along the way. It also meant teaching them academic grit, which is persevering and having resilience through every obstacle they may encounter. It also required me to be a transparent leader, meaning I had to be open with them and be willing to help them in any way they needed me to.

With structuring the organization, I had to consider several things: legal matters, sources of support and recruiting.

Early in the process I met with Cedric James, Assistant Director of the TCU IdeaFactory. The purpose of the IdeaFactory is to support the “entrepreneurial spirit of TCU students, staff, and faculty by providing an environment and resources where an idea can be advanced to a prototype and potentially, beyond” (TCU Idea Factory, 2018). Over the course of three meetings, Mr. James suggested starting within one high school and then strengthening the framework to transfer to other schools. I also participated in two IdeaFactory ideation sessions, where I practiced pitching my idea to an audience of fellow TCU entrepreneurial students.

In order to get an idea of the types of things I wanted my organization to provide I set up a meeting with Matt Burckhalter, the Program Director for the College Advising Corps at TCU. The College Advising Corps has similar goals to *Be Authentic*. It provides relatable, near-peer mentors to help students from economically disadvantaged high schools prepare for life after graduation. The main thing I took away from my CAC meeting was that I needed to have each *Be Authentic* student aim for her full potential. Each one of their journeys would look very different compared to other *Be Authentic* students. Letting them know this would also be important, which honed in on my authenticity aspect.

Legal matters.

In order for *Be Authentic* to accept monetary donations there were specific legal steps I had to take. I applied for a Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN) through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Then I created the Articles of Incorporation through the Texas Secretary of State. This document included the purpose of the organization, its mission statement, meeting structure, financial plan, target audience and goals. It also specified a non-paid Board of three members. The fee for this was \$25, which I paid personally. A colleague at my previous place of employment helped me develop a Business Plan so I could ask for monetary support in the future. Finally, I used an online legal website to apply for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit status with the IRS. I paid the \$1545 document preparation and IRS filing fees myself.

Sources of support.

Be Authentic received support from four sources. I paid the initial legal startup costs of \$1570 and provided approximately \$1500 to meet other needs, like food for events, renting the TCU van to transport students for visits to TCU, supplementing our back-to-school drive, and buying *Be Authentic* swag. The TCU IdeaFactory used discretionary funds to purchase *Be*

Authentic swag, such as T-shirts, journals, phone wallets, pens and water bottles that I could distribute to program participants. Then I entered a competition sponsored by the IdeaFactory and the School of Interdisciplinary Studies. I won second place in this “Design Thinking Challenge”, which provided \$1000 (which would eventually be used for taking the participants on college visits and paying for college application fee waivers). The church I attended as a teenager donated \$1500, which I later used for our first *Be Authentic* community event, a back-to-school drive. Later on, local businesses also supported us by donating gift cards.

Recruiting.

Trimble Technical High School is where I decided to launch *Be Authentic*. In May of 2017, I set up an introductory meeting with the College and Career Readiness Coach, Mrs. My Jones. With the given description of *Be Authentic*, Mrs. Jones invited a hundred students to hear me speak and potentially sign-up. Forty students attended the presentation and at the end twenty-five signed up. I informed them program did not start until the upcoming Fall Semester of 2017. Once transportation and time commitment were discussed I had a total of 15 students actively participating.

The Program

The outline of *Be Authentic* consisted of three components: workshops, college visits and community outreach events. The four main objectives were:

1. Each student will be prepared for the next steps into college/career program.
2. Assist in identifying individual career paths for each student and support students' personal and professional growth.
3. Host workshops that will give the students an opportunity to practice and understand professional and leadership skills.

4. Shape students to be confident and ecstatic with their uniqueness and use it throughout their journey in life.

Workshops.

At the start of the fall 2017 semester, I setup the first informational workshop for the students to be brought to TCU Campus. The purpose of this workshop was to give them an idea of several colleges within TCU and show case women who have overcome adversity. The purpose of inviting all women to speak was to see an image of themselves in higher education. Throughout the program there were six additional workshops.

1. Self-Advocacy
2. Exploring Leadership
3. Good Study Habits
4. Job Interviewing
5. Resume Writing
6. Formatting an Essay

During every workshop, there was group discussions, engagement activities and reflection. These workshops were chosen based on a questionnaire that each participant filled out. It allowed me to gage their career and college interests and discover the areas of improvement we needed to focus on.

The questionnaire consisted of the following:

- Colleges of possible interest
- Ultimate Goal and/or Career Objective
- What are educational or career goals?

- What are your strengths and strongest school subjects? What school subjects would you like to improve?
- Is your academic record (grades) indicative of your abilities? Explain.
- List 6 adjectives that describe you. Circle 3 that best describe you. Which ones do you think your teachers would circle to describe you? Explain your answer.
- Who or what has inspired you or motivated you in your life? Explain in detail.
- What special talents, abilities or contributions would you bring to the college/career of your choice?
- What are your hobbies, talents, special abilities? Please list them separately. Bullet points are fine.

Based on the responses amongst these questionnaire's I realized early on that I had a sharp group of young women that up until this point had never been given an outlet to showcase their talent. This aspect excited me as I embarked upon this authentic journey with these unique students.

College Visits.

All the students in *Be Authentic* are underrepresented in some way whether it is first generation, low income, or minority. In order to allow the students an opportunity to view a wide variety of programs and different college atmospheres, we went on three college visits. Over the course of the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters we visited UNT, Texas A&M Commerce and Baylor University. During each visit we participated in a group tour and an informational session. The session included steps in the admission application, the GPA requirements each university had, financial aid available and how to apply, and housing and meal plans. Every trip proved to be a revelation for every student. Almost all of them have had a difficult upbringing

where they now find it difficult to trust others and believe in themselves. This was an initial barrier in making a connection. During each college visit, we had a group lunch afterwards. During these moments we engaged in discussions. I let each student know that I will be there for them no matter the case and they can call me anytime. A lot of responses I received was why. And my answer was why not. Why wouldn't I want to help someone whose shoes I was just in not that long ago and give them a head start that I did not have. There were moments when their assigned *Be Authentic* mentors were not available, but I made sure I was always accessible and that showed my commitment which eventually brewed their trust in me.

Community Engagement Events.

In order to be a leader, you have to be willing to make a social impact. By having this component, *Be Authentic* would prepare future leaders in society. One of the goals is to have community outreach events that we would host and organize. This aspect would allow the students to help someone less fortunate and realize there is always a need that is greater than your own. We hosted three outreach events that included a back-to-school drive, meals on wheels and a blanket drive for the homeless.

In the summer of 2017, *Be Authentic* hosted a back-to-school drive at the Grand Prairie YMCA. I wrote donation request letters to Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Target, Kroger and Office Depot and received several gift cards from each business. There was backpacks and school supplies donated from friends, from some of my high school teachers and the community. The remainder of the monetary donations was given by Charity Church in Fort Worth and myself. After speaking with the owner of Kalibur Barber College, several barber students agreed to provide free haircuts the whole day. With all the support, we were able to give away two hundred backpacks filled with school supplies to children in the community. There were some

parents that could not make the event so a few of the students and I got in my car and begin to drive the backpacks to their job or a nearby meeting area.

During the fall of 2017, we hosted an event called “Meals on Wheels”. By writing donation letters to several grocery stores and advertising on social media, we were able to buy \$1,500 worth of food. Three of the TCU student mentors, the *Be Authentic* participants and I had a cooking fest at my home preparing meals. After the all the meals were packaged up, we went out to the area surrounding the Salvation Army and homeless shelters to pass out plates.

Our last event was a blanket drive titled “Keep Fort Worth Warm”. In addition to the donation request letters, I sent out emails to all classmates encouraging support. Amazingly, we have collected two hundred and fifty items that included blankets, gloves, socks, hats and coats. As a team we passed out each item to a homeless person near the shelters on Lancaster Rd that could not get a space inside. We offered prayer to the ones who wanted it and prayed for strength, hope and prosperity.

At the end of each event, there was group reflection on how this experience changed their views. Each student voiced how grateful they are now and how they learned to be thankful for the small things. My words were that you never know where someone comes from by where they are now. We are called to carry one another’s burden in the smallest form.

Evaluation

At the end of spring 2018 I was able to assist the three senior students in their college applications and pay their application fees.

From the efforts of *Be Authentic*, three girls went on to college who normally would have not due to lack of support and resources. Looking back at the experience of starting an organization in an effort to change young girl’s lives and promote success within yourself shows

aspects I would change and aspects that I want to be the foundation. In order to show how *Be Authentic* affected each graduating student, I asked each girl that to either draw a picture or pick out a picture that did not include either of our faces that describes this experience for them. The pictures and descriptions are listed below.

Student 1

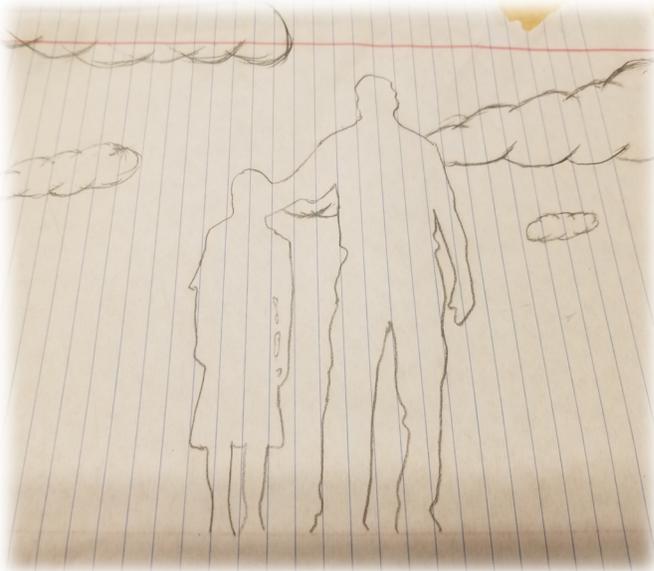


Description: I chose this picture because I feel like it best represents us in the sense that we have both come from very different walks of life. Some of the events that have occurred in your life are ones that I cannot relate to and vice versa. However, just like the ying and the yang, in some crazy way we have both blended our experiences together to form a whole. A whole in which we benefit from each other through being both friends and through our mentor-mentee relationship that has developed from this program.

Having this program not only gave me another friend but also someone I can look up to and receive advice from outside of family members. Aside from the comedic relief and fits of laughter during our meetings, I have learned that I am capable of doing and achieving more.

Student 2

Description: This program has helped me grow and filled me with knowledge learned from your encounters in life. You have helped me academically because I know I can go to someone else I can depend on in order to understand life and school situations better.

Student 3

Description: I drew this picture because this program has provided me someone to help guide me through life and hard situations. This was something I never had before.

What I've Learned

Through my actions within *Be Authentic* I created relationships. I have developed a *praxis* that mentoring matters. It was proven when three incredible young ladies pursued their post-secondary degree when at the beginning they had no clue if they would have the opportunity.

I am in the process of recruiting the next cohort of girls from Dunbar High School. I am now restricting the program to allow more workshops, community outreach events, college visits and one on one meetings with me. I've decided to remove the personal mentor aspect and all participating students will be assigned to me. This will still allow them the personal role model for support and encouragement but also allows me to be fully accountable for the outcome of every meeting.

As the program continues to grow, I eventually want the model of this organization to be on several college campuses that will reach out to their surrounding high schools and begin to provide resources, academic support, and professional skills for students to pursue a college career.

Throughout this process I have learned not only how to develop a non-profit organization but also how to be a transparent leader. Showing the students not only the accomplishments but also preparing them for the potential obstacles along the way was an obligation of mine. I found this to be extremely difficult for three reasons. First, I am an all-around positive person and I choose to focus on the positive and ignore the negative. This way of thinking can be detrimental. Second, each student has experienced hardships and the discussion of future hardships can potentially be discouraging for some. Finally, in order for me to give them advice on future obstacles I had to share my personal experiences in its entirety, so they can develop a full understanding. I found this the most challenging because I have never fully reflected on my

difficult moments. As the director and founder of this organization, I had to reflect on all three of these points as I wanted each student to get the most out of *Be Authentic* that I could provide.

Originally the program was structured as a mentoring model as I felt that having a personal supportive and encouraging role model would be beneficial to each girl's mindset towards collegiate success. I chose TCU students as mentors but as *Be Authentic* continued on, I have realized most TCU students already have organizational commitments along with their class load. This caused several meetings where some mentors were not available. As a result of this a couple of the girls discontinued their participation. As a result, I re-evaluated the structure to make sure the girls received a positive experience. The framework for *Be Authentic* is now workshops and events with a monthly individual meeting with myself. During the events and workshops the TCU students that were once mentors would assist in facilitating and organizing.

Starting an organization was the easiest part of this process. The part that required strategy, time, analytical thinking, dedication and an open heart was mentoring these young ladies. This does not come easy but can feel easy when your passion is as deep rooted as mine.

Future Directions

As I pursue graduate school, *Be Authentic* will move with me. This would mean the current students would not be active participants next semester. For the future, I want to recruit a team of people that would be assigned duties such as:

1. Planning Community Outreach Events
2. Scheduling and coordinating college visits
3. Facilitate workshops
4. Write and deliver donation request letters.

If this team was assembled at the beginning, *Be Authentic* would have been able to continue at Trimble Technical High School without me. When I relocate to my future graduate school and recruit my next cohort of participants, I will also recruit a team. This will allow the program to thrive once I graduate and begin my career elsewhere.

In order to make certain *Be Authentic* is providing skills and resources that the students need, I will develop a shorter entrance questionnaire that hones in on each students' interests, limitations, mindset of post-secondary plans, and concept of what self-advocacy means to them. Based on the responses I will be able to plan workshops that are relevant. Most importantly, I want the foundation of *Be Authentic* to continue be encouragement and support. Just being there makes more of difference than any workshop or event I can provide.

Epilogue

My honors project and undergraduate college career is coming to an end at a real high point with continued encouragement from the couple that met me at my lowest moment in high school.

From Felix in October 2018

I know it is not always easy doing what you do, but I'm glad I can say this and mean it. We are so proud of the mom and woman you have turned into from the girl we met years ago. You will face many challenges and battles in life, but know you are not alone. God loves you so much. He will continue to provide for you even on those days that you feel beat up. Keep being a gladiator. Your boys will know one day how much you truly love them. We love you."

References

IdeaFactory, TCU. (2018). Supporting the Innovation Spirit of TCU. Retrieved from <https://sis.tcu.edu/ideafactory/>