

MENTORING THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Intersectionality refers a framework for understanding how overlapping aspects of a person's social and political identities contribute to distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. It is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to explain how race, gender identity, social class, sexual orientation, disability, religion, generation, and other individual identities intersect with one another and create differential experiences of oppression and privilege. Each person has a mixture of identities. Some identities convey power and unearned privilege, while others are sources of oppression and unfair treatment. **A person's experience is a function of the combination of their identities—a black cisgender man's experience is different from a black transgender woman's experience.** From the intersectional perspective, social structures and public policy marginalize or exacerbate vulnerabilities associated with identity to create further disempowerment among different people and communities. The focus on intersectionality reminds us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type of power dynamic, but that oppressions work together to produce injustices.

Applying the intersectional lens to mentoring can enrich the mentoring experiences, especially for mentees who experience multiple forms of oppression. Mentors play a crucial role in helping adolescents explore their emerging sense of self and make sense of sources of oppression. Quality mentoring relationships produce powerful positive influences on young people and connect their personal growth to improved social and economic opportunity. Mentors can equip mentees to recognize, honor, and encourage diverse identities and understand how structural and institutional practices create differential oppression based on identities. The following are a few guidelines to help you mentor through an intersectional lens:

- **Respect all identities.** Foster acceptance of diverse identities by modeling inclusivity. Identities can be both visible and invisible. They can also change over time. It is important to respect how people choose to label themselves rather than assume a certain label is preferred or politically correct. Always ask which pronouns someone wants you to use and use them and recognize that pronouns can change often for some people, while others may not feel safe sharing their pronouns with everyone for fear of violence.

- **Acknowledge differences.** The intersectional perspective recognizes that no one lives with one identity. Our experiences of privilege and oppression are modified and multiplied by intersecting identities. Recruiting mentors who identify with youths from diverse identities is one way that mentoring programs encourage bonds between mentors and mentees. Reflect on your own identities and intersectionality. While sharing your experiences can open the conversation about oppression, do not assume that your mentee has the same experiences as you even if they are of the same race, cultural background, gender identity, or religion. Intersectionality is complex; your mentee's experiences are not the same as yours due to differences in intersectional identities.
- **Examine implicit bias.** Challenge yourself and your mentee to examine implicit biases and knowledge about various marginalized identities and make a conscious effort to confront microaggressions and hate speech. We all should check our biases despite our social identities or experiences with oppression. Even people within the same identity group can oppress others within that group. For example, women can oppress other women and persons within the LGBTQA+ group can oppress transgender people. When you strive to be culturally responsive, you reflect on how your own identities influence your actions and leave open the possibility that others may be offended.
- **Show cultural humility.** Be open to aspects of other people's identities that is important to them. How a person celebrates their identities or the importance that they place on various aspects of their identities is personal. Being culturally humble includes taking an other-oriented stance, boldly examining your beliefs and assumptions about other identities, working to fix imbalances of power, and creating partnerships with people and groups who advocate for themselves and others.
- **Cultivate accessibility.** Be intentional about teaching your mentee about creating accessible spaces. Inclusivity means paying attention to whether space is physically accessible, the use of sign language interpreters and captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing, quiet spaces and ear plugs for persons on the autism spectrum or making materials available in braille or large print for the visually impaired. Choose venues and events where space is accessible for persons of all abilities. When this is not possible, talk with your mentee about what the consequences are of not being inclusive and how they can take action to promote more

inclusive spaces by advocating for changes with venue owners and event sponsors.

- **Focus on positive coping strategies.** Adolescence is a period of phenomenal socioemotional growth, self-awareness, and identity development. During this time, identities are fluid and adolescents learn key coping skills to work through issues associated with intersecting identities, especially where they experience oppression and discrimination. Youth learn both positive and negative coping strategies in response to the cumulative experiences of disadvantages and privileges. Mentors can reinforce positive developmentally appropriate coping skills to help mentees navigate oppression.
- **Broaden the conversation.** Help your mentee develop an understanding of how different forms of oppression have been shaped by public policy, or a divisive discourse that pits people of color against white people. Racism is not only the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also embedded in legal systems, social structures, and public policies. As a mentor, you can help your mentee identify and critique the causes of social inequality and how intersectionality in terms of both unfair treatment and unearned privilege has impacted their lives and the lives of others.
- **Teach advocacy.** With their mentees, mentors can explore the ways unfair exclusion and unearned inclusion reproduce systems of inequality and identify ways to advocate for a more equalitarian system. Mentors can motivate mentees to direct toward advocating for change and show them that they make a real difference. You can help your mentee explore various ways to advocate for social change, e.g., writing letters to government officials, learning about the legislative process, supporting local business and charitable efforts, and volunteering for advisory boards that promote youth voice.

Definitions of Key Terms:

Accessibility -- When a person with a disability is afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use.

Implicit bias -- Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions about other people in an unconscious manner.

Intersectionality -- A framework for understanding a person's experience in terms of their multiple, intersecting identities e.g., race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, social class, cultural, linguistic, generation, and other identities that carry different levels of privilege and oppression.

LGBTQA+ -- An all-inclusive acronym used to refer persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, or any other gender orientation-sexual orientation identity.

Cisgender -- Denotes or relates to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

Transgender -- Denotes or relates to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

Cultural humility -- An approach that emphasizes being open to learning in a non-judgmental way about another person's culture, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other identity-based experiences.

Microaggression -- Commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or marginalized groups.

Other Resources from the Governor's Prevention Partnership:

[6 Tips for Mentors to Recognize and Respond to Microaggressions](#)

[Understanding SOGIE](#)

[Guidance for Mentors on Talking to Mentees about Current Events](#)