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A Preliminary Study of the Feasibility of a Global Connections Mentoring Program for Panamanian Girls

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Abstract:

Established in 1997, the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) is a mentoring program that pairs middle school girls with college women from the University of Virginia for combined group and one-on-one mentoring. In addition to their initial preventative program model, YWLP has recently begun to develop a global connections curriculum in order to create an opportunity for cultural exchange amongst girls and women across the globe. This study focused on the feasibility of developing a YWLP "sister site" in Panama City, Panama and their participating in a cultural exchange with YWLP girls in Virginia. .

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of Panamanian girls (n = 19) and women (n = 10) to identify the salient issues facing adolescent girls in Panama City, assess whether the YWLP curriculum and structure (combined group and one-on-one mentoring) could be adapted to address these issues, and evaluate the experience of the Panamanian participants in a small YWLP pilot cultural exchange that occurred last year. Findings indicated that pilot participants enjoyed the exchange and felt an increased sense of connection to peers abroad. Teenage pregnancy, lack of education, social pressures and discrimination were among the issues identified as common concerns for Panamanian girls. Study participants indicated an interest in participating in a similar mentoring program, preferably in a school setting.

Introduction:

Youth mentoring programs across the United States are a common method of support for today's youth population. According to the National Mentoring Partnership, three million U.S. children currently have mentors, though 15 million still wish to have one (MENTOR, 2012). The

Partnership encourages such relationships because, "when done well, youth mentoring holds great promise in helping young people succeed in life." In fact, research suggests that youth mentoring can help reduce incidence of substance use and academic failure, while supporting positive outcomes such as improved self-esteem, knowledge of career opportunities, and enhanced social interactions (MENTOR, 2012).

Mentoring may be a particularly effective form of prevention for early adolescent girls as they face multiple challenges during this developmental stage. Early adolescence is a period when complex physical, cognitive, and social changes begin (Arnett, 1999). As girls enter adolescence, they show elevated risk for physical or sexual abuse by a dating partner (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001), higher levels of social aggression (Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005), depression (Culbertson, 1997), body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003), and school dropout due to pregnancy (Solomon & Liefeld, 1998). Thus, gender specific mentoring programs that offer extended relationships between mentors and adolescent girls may be one way to provide early adolescent girls the support they need to successfully navigate this period of their life. .

However, there are relatively few gender-specific mentoring programs for early adolescent girls. In a recent review of gender-responsive programming, Chesney-Lind, et al. (2008) note that, "the disregard for girls in programming is mirrored by the lack of any national, detailed research on girls' needs, and by the failure of science to show what works for girls. Girls needs have been, in short, easier to ignore" (p. 170). One program countering this issue is the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), developed at the University of Virginia (Lawrence et al., 2008). YWLP provides combined group and one-on-one mentoring to seventh and eighth grade girls who are nominated by teachers or guidance counselors as young women who are

deemed socially, academically, and/or emotionally at risk and could benefit from the support of a mentor. The girls are paired with college women mentors for an academic year. College women complete an application and interview process prior to being selected as mentors. They undergo mentoring training that consists of a two-hour workshop prior to the start of the mentoring relationship and an ongoing two-semester course on best mentoring practices, leadership, and female adolescence. Matches are based on mutual interests and compatible schedules.

YWLP mentoring pairs meet for two-hour long group sessions once a week with five to eight other pairs and two undergraduate or graduate student group facilitators. Sessions follow a research-based group curriculum that focuses on competence, connection and autonomy, and supports the girls' academic, social and emotional development (Lawrence, Sovik-Johnston, Roberts, & Thorndike, 2009). The curriculum teaches participants academic and interpersonal skills that are useful for middle school girl development (e.g., organizing homework, problem solving, creating support teams) and provides opportunities for them to develop and participate in leadership service projects in the school and community (e.g., appreciation dinner, school legacy project). Since 1997, YWLP has mentored over 1200 middle school girls, trained over 1200 college women mentors in Virginia, and supported the establishment of 12 "sister sites" at various colleges and communities in the United States and Africa.

Global Connections for Adolescent Girls:

Research suggests that cross-cultural exchanges (e.g., international study programs) provide students numerous social and academic benefits (Kitsantas, 2004; Engle, 2004). However, participation in these programs by low-income youth is limited because of the cost. Yet, in an increasingly globalized world, "international and cross-cultural awareness and understanding on the part of U.S. citizens will be crucial to effective U.S. leadership,

competitiveness, prosperity, and national security in the next century" (NAFSA, 2000). While an ideal method of fostering international understanding is through cultural immersion, this is not always possible. Incorporating a global engagement focus into youth mentoring programs may be one avenue for reaching students of a more diverse demographic. A global engagement curriculum would allow participants to learn about another culture, connect with students from different backgrounds, and discuss similarities and differences they find between themselves and their adolescent counterparts abroad. These interactions may provide comparable benefits to onsite cultural immersion.

Hunter (2004) suggests that global competence involves developing open-mindedness, knowledge about cultural norms, and global sensitivity, while becoming a global citizen combines cultural perspective-taking with concrete application of this knowledge (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006). Based on these benefits, and encouraged by the success of past YWLP expansion and adaptation of their mentoring model both nationally and internationally, the YWLP staff developed curriculum that included a global connections component (Mims et al., 2012). The curriculum was piloted during the 2010-2011 academic year and focused on facilitating an exchange of letters, cultural artifacts, and information between girls in YWLP in Virginia and girls in either Cameroon or Panama: The 7th grade YWLP groups in Virginia focused on exchanges with girls participating in YWLP in Cameroon while the 8th grade Virginia YWLP groups focused on exchanges with a small group of girls in Panama (n = 5). While Cameroon had previously been established as a "sister site," and the YWLP curriculum had been modified to better address the needs of Cameroonian girls (Jarmon et al., 2012), the Panamanian participants were not in a mentoring program and volunteered for the exchange at the suggestion of a relative in YWLP in Virginia. The focus of this article builds on the exchange with the

Panamanian girls. This exchange consisted of four UVA mentoring groups receiving six letters from the pilot participants and the UVA participants sending approximately 30 short letters back in response. The letters included information on the girls' daily lives, their schools, their friends, and their country. Cultural artifacts included CDs, fabric, books, videos, and bracelets.

Current Project:

Based on the success of the global exchange with the Virginia YWLP girls (Mims et al., 2012) and the success in adapting the YWLP model to fit the needs of adolescent girls in Cameroon (Jarmon et al., 2012), the current project sought to assess the possibility of establishing a YWLP sister site in Panama City. Using data gathered via interviews and focus groups with girls and women in Panama City, Panama and the surrounding areas, including the pilot exchange participants (n = 5), other adolescent girls (n =14), college-age women (n = 6), and teachers and community youth leaders (n = 4), the current project focused on identifying salient issues facing adolescent girls and women in Panama, and the interest in and feasibility of starting a mentoring program similar to the YWLP there. The project was part of the independent research of an undergraduate student facilitated by a Community Based Undergraduate Research Grant (CBURG) at the University of Virginia.

Methods:

In order to assess the feasibility of adapting the YWLP curriculum for Panamanian adolescent girls in Panama City, and evaluate their need for, or interest in, an YWLP ''sister site', four different study groups were interviewed independently or in a focus group setting. Participant responses in groups 1, 2 and 4 were photographed and video-recorded. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. Interview responses have been translated into English.

Group 1 (n = 14) was comprised of Panamanian girls age 12-15 identified at random through a network of community contacts. Girls of this demographic were included in the study as their age and experience were expected to align with that of the mentees, or "littles", of the mentoring program in Charlottesville. Potential participants were contacted verbally via a trusted adult (e.g., teacher, relative). Participants were asked to identify salient issues facing girls their age, share their goals for the future, and discuss the possible benefits of participating in a mentoring program.

Group 2 (n = 6) consisted of Panamanian women age 18-26, identified by community contacts as those potentially interested in a mentoring role with adolescent girls. Given that a functioning program could not exist without the interest of these women, relatively comparable in age and experience to the Charlottesville mentors, or "bigs", their input and interest level was deemed a priority in assessing the feasibility of a sister site. These participants were invited to participate via email, or verbally via a teacher or friend. Participants were asked to identify salient issues facing adolescent girls based on observations from the present day and drawing on memories of their own experiences during adolescence, identify resources they wished that they had had during that stage in their lives, and consider if and/or how a mentoring role might benefit them and contribute to their future goals.

Group 3 (n = 4) consisted of teachers, and community youth program leaders. Youth program leaders came from both government-supported and independent non-profit settings. Considered a primary source of knowledge on the youth with whom they worked, and aware of the utility of their support in leading a potential program, this group of participants answered questions regarding the salient issues facing the adolescent girls with whom they worked, the

currently available youth programs for this population, and their interest in mentoring programs such as YWLP, as well as the potential benefits of a similar program in the community.

Group 4 consisted of Panamanian girls (n = 5) age 15-18 who participated in a pilot exchange of letters and cultural artifacts (e.g., music, fabrics, books) with girls in the eighth grade YWLP of UVA. Participants were asked to provide feedback on their experience in the exchange, identify salient issues facing girls their age, share their goals for the future, and discuss the possible benefits of participating in a mentoring program. With prior knowledge of the program and having formerly communicated with participants from Charlottesville, the feedback from the Panamanian girls of this group regarding their initial experience was anticipated to contribute greatly to both a new sister site and a revised global connections curriculum.

Results:

Adolescent Girl Interviews

The adolescent girls who had not previously participated in the exchange came from a variety of backgrounds. A few (n = 2) were middle to upper class private school students. The majority (n = 12) came from a lower class neighborhood in the area surrounding Panama City. There was a marked contrast in the responses between these two groups. The private school students identified issues relating to their social life as among the most important. Dating, relationships, sex, and fitting in were voiced as concerns in addition to issues of discrimination. One participant described the issue of discrimination as it relates to religion stating, "If you go to church a lot, people put you on the outside. If you don't go to church, it's considered cool…if they want to make me an outsider for that, I'm an outsider." The vast majority of Panamanians (85%) are reported to be Catholic, while 15% are reported as Protestant, making nearly all

Panamanians Christians of some form (CIA World Factbook). However, not all actively practice their religion by attending mass or church regularly. While the participants from the lower class neighborhood also mentioned issues relating to social life, such as bullying or teasing, their responses generally focused on community issues. The girls identified violence in their community, littering, and robberies as among their concerns. One participant also cited sex, drugs and alcohol abuse as important issues. In a 2003 National Survey of Students in Panama (Encuesta Nacional de Estudiantes), 48% of students reported that it was easy or very easy to obtain illicit drugs in Panama. In order of popularity, alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana were the top three consumed substances among students surveyed ("Noticias del Observador – Cuarto Trimestre" 1-5).

Participants from both groups identified graduating from high school as among their future goals. Many participants placed going to college or continuing their education as a priority and had detailed plans for their careers (e.g., becoming a veterinarian, teacher, or doctor). Girls across both groups mentioned getting a scholarship or grant to continue their education as being important. Some participants stated plans to pursue their education or personal interests outside of Panama (e.g., Brazil, Argentina and the United States). Many of the girls from the lower class community also listed "being a better daughter or person," and "helping my family" as future goals. This suggests an ongoing dedication to one's family, both nuclear and extended, in more rural areas, whereas this traditional value may be less prominent in the more urban areas due to globalization and enhanced opportunities.

Participants expressed a strong interest in participating in a mentoring program like YWLP and felt that a college-aged mentor could help them deal with tough issues, such as discrimination, and getting to know people. "It's hard to get to know [new] people and make

friends. I started at my school when I was two years old," explained a participant. They showed interest in learning about a mentor's daily life, her work, and the advice she could offer from her experience. Participants also reflected a basic desire to just hang out and play with mentors, as well. Participant interest in a cultural exchange curriculum as a component of the mentoring program was also assessed. All expressed an interest in learning about cultures and languages other than their own.

Potential Mentor Interviews

Women age 18-26 identified salient issues facing adolescent girls in Panama as being divided between social classes. Teenage pregnancy, lack of education or poor quality education, and an inadequate family unit were identified as the predominant issues facing girls from low income backgrounds. "There are many girls who get pregnant, young girls—14, 15, 16—and this happens due to lack of education. Overall, Panama is lacking quality education that is accessible to everyone," explained one participant. Another participants agreed that if girls were not leaving school due to pregnancy, they left to begin to work in order to support their families. Participants agreed that the cost of a quality education was high, starting between $1,300 and $1,600 per student, per year of secondary school (Castillo Duarte). In regards to the family structure available to young girls, participants presented sentiments of skepticism. "Many families aren't so supportive or don't know how to be. They don't know how to help with things like schoolwork or how to direct their child in that area because they themselves never finished school. And that's how things like young girls who already have three kids happens," said one participant. In addition to a generation gap, participants cited single parent or non-traditional nuclear families as a contributing factor and claimed "young people don't have a role model at home."

While some of these things (e.g., lack of quality sex education, a troubled family life) still came up as issues amongst girls from the middle and upper class that are privately educated, participants felt the issues were less common. Girls within this higher socio-economic demographic were more likely to be concerned with social issues. Dating, going to clubs at a young age, substance abuse, issues relating to self-esteem (including anorexia and bulimia), and discrimination were commonly listed examples.

Participants cited a desire for greater access to sexual health education, greater career and/or life guidance, and better family communication when asked to discuss resources that they wished they had had during their own adolescent years. 'I don't think there was enough about sexual health [in school]. I had to learn it from friends. [School] should have a little bit more of that and…about consuming alcohol. There needs to be prevention," explained one participant in regards to her education. In regards to communication within her family, another participant stated, "Communication with parents was difficult. You think something and your parents are in a totally different culture than you are." Participants also mentioned feeling a lack of confidence and not receiving positive messages regarding body image from family and peers.

The majority of participants in this group was studying or had studied psychology. Some studied adolescent psychology specifically. Therefore, many expressed that participating in a mentoring program would benefit them in their careers and/or their studies. "Right now I'm beginning to do cases where I don't know what I'm doing, or I don't have enough experience… It would be cool to work with people who have other experiences, more experience than me, to learn," explained one participant regarding the professional benefits of working with a mentoring program that included a group component. Another participant agreed that hands on experience working with adolescents would have been useful in working towards her thesis.

Moreover, participants seemed interested in the personal and community benefits that participating in a mentoring program would bring. "For young girls, I honestly feel like they're missing, I don't know, like they're missing mentors!" said one participant of her interest in the program, thus highlighting an indicated need for such a program in her opinion. "I feel like as someone who doesn't have so much time between the age…I still remember what it was like…for girls who don't have a place to go or don't have the support of their family… [You] are someone who they can go to, a way for them to get out of the house and give them some confidence or understanding if they feel like their family doesn't get it," explained another participant regarding her interest.

Interviews with Professionals

Professionals, such as teachers and leaders of community youth organizations, identified gender inequality (often referred to in Latin America as *"machismo"*), violence, substance abuse, and early pregnancy/sexual health as major issues facing adolescent girls. Such issues are worsened by economic situations and lack of education, particularly for girls in low-income families attending public schools, which one participant even referred to as ―hell.‖ They expressed concern that the divide between upper and lower class populations or, in this context, public and private school systems, was increasing. They referenced many girls' failure to complete at least a high school education as a major issue for girls in public schools. Fourteen years old is the average school life expectancy for Panamanian girls (CIA World Factbook). The link between education and teenage pregnancy may be bi-directional. Participants suggested that girls in public schools typically lack opportunities for sexual health education, making them more likely to get pregnant when they become sexually active than girls in private schools. Girls who get pregnant are less likely to continue their education (Montenegro). According to a 2008

Life Quality Survey (Encuesta de niveles de vida) conducted by the government of Panama, 17.3% of women of fertile age who were pregnant were adolescents age 15-19 (Carrasco 10-11).

Participants explained that girls in low-income families often have to go to work at a young age in order to support their families. Girls, in particular, are often pulled out of school by their families in order to help take care of younger siblings while their parents work. "One girl told me: I want to be a mother. And when my husband leaves me I'm going to be a mother and a father," a participant said, explaining the goals described to her by an adolescent girl with whom she worked. Furthermore, they perceived work opportunities for adolescent girls who do complete their education to be limited as compared to boys. "There are positions which, without a doubt, will not be given to women. For example, carpentry, engineering, women working for the Canal… [To] me, this signifies that they don't have the opportunity…the pay rate for women still isn't the same for women [and men] in Panama," explained one participant, further reflecting the gender inequality and remaining presence of *machismo* in the country.

One participant discussed the growing exposure to negative portrayals of women for upper and middle class girls due to increased globalization. —With all of the advertising, the media, the model of what it is to be a woman in the upper and middle class is like to have your Jimmy Choos, a BMW, and dress up like a Playboy, she said. This affects the girls' attitudes towards traditionally age-appropriate activities. The participant shared an anecdote about taking a group of girls to a neighborhood park and having the girls react with confusion and boredom. She explained, "We get there and they're like, ok what do we do now? I don't know, go play! Climb a tree! Whatever. They were so bored. They couldn't do it. They couldn't have fun.' In sharp contrast to this, a participant noted that girls from the lower class and rural areas are getting left behind the modernization that is occurring in Panama City. "The divide between the

lower class and upper class is getting bigger and bigger. The lower class feels the enormous difference that exists between the two. So in regards to the lower class, what has changed for these girls [over the last few decades]? Not much. And that's part of the problem," she explained.

In addition to globalization and the increasing media pressure directed towards girls, participants noted a decrease in positive role models for girls that could stand in contrast to such unattainable images. Participants stated that family units needed to be a source of greater support but, instead there was a shift in the moral values being fostered in the home setting in comparison to past generations. "The home should offer a greater variety of information. There should be more trust. There are actually parents who don't even want to talk to their children, so the girls learn what they learn from school, from their neighbors and peers…that, combined with the media, makes for a big failure," explained one participant.

According to participants, programs similar to YWLP do exist in Panama City in terms of the curriculum they cover, but few use mentors. After school programs for homework help, artistic initiatives, and micro-financing projects in rural areas are among those currently offered. Programs are generally run through government organizations such as the Ministry of Social Development or the Ministry of Education, though there are private non-profits as well. Participants expressed a strong interest in having a program similar to YWLP for the girls they work with, particularly if it involved an exchange between girls of different cultures that may lead to both groups understanding one another better. "It would be really good, very productive here in the city. Because in reality, [the girls] don't have this companionship. Most of their parents work and when they get home after school, nobody is watching [them],"explained a participant. However, while all participants supported the idea in theory, some were wary of its

potential negative impacts. "I'm going to be a little critical of mentoring," said one participant whose organization had had an unsuccessful mentoring experience with American Fulbright scholars in the past. "The activities needed to be much more concrete. Because its like the girls were waiting for them to get together, but in the end they didn't…I think it needs to have a contract with the participants so the girls aren't left in limbo," she concluded.

Pilot Participant Interviews

The pilot participants all attend the same private, Catholic school and come from middle to upper class backgrounds. They identified salient issues in their own lives and the lives of girls their age primarily as those relating to aspects of their social life. They were particularly concerned with issues of discrimination, being labeled or judged. Multiple participants expressed that they felt that they were being stereotyped based on their appearance or the activities that they were involved in, then discriminated against based on those stereotypes. One girl described this discrimination as "really noticeable." In addition to stereotypes based on image (e.g., "emo", "butch"), the participants noted discrimination based on race, class, and religion as well.

Similar to the adolescent girls in Group 1, all the participants identified graduating from high school and going to college as among their main goals for the future. Some also stated their desire to have their own things (e.g., a house, a car) so as not to depend on others. The desire to have a house outside of the family home directly after graduation is an interesting comment, as the majority of individuals within the Panamanian and Latin American culture, particularly women, tend to live with their parents until marriage. The participants also identified having a job as a high priority.

Overall, the participants felt that their involvement in a mentoring program similar to

YWLP would benefit them. Participants said that they felt mentors would help them be better at interacting with others and going through transitions because mentors could share their own life experiences. "[Mentors] could help us with things like how to react when someone bothers you, to not react badly," stated one participant. Another seconded this, saying mentors would help her understand ―how to act with new people because [she, the potential mentee, has] always had the same friends.‖ Most private schools in Panama City span grades K-12, thus it is unlikely students who remain in the same school throughout their education will meet many new people.

In addition to a basic mentoring model, the pilot participants all expressed their appreciation for the exchange of letters and artifacts that they participated in the year before and felt it would be worthwhile to include in a mentoring program in Panama, particularly given the fact that most girls their age of similar backgrounds learn English in school. In regards to the exchange, the participants stated that they enjoyed it and would change nothing about the process. They particularly liked getting information back from the girls in Virginia. One girl stated that the exchange gave them the opportunity to ―realize that its not just Panama, but another side, too.‖ However, they also noted that the exchange did not just highlight the differences between the two groups, but also the similarities saying, ―There aren't as many differences in our lives as you would think.‖

Discussion:

Based on the interviews and focus groups conducted, the research indicates an overlapping set of concerns facing Panamanian adolescent girls across the four groups in the study. Panamanian girls from varying demographic backgrounds have similar goals (i.e., completing high school, going to college), yet face varying sets of barriers in achieving those goals (i.e., economic factors, education inequality). Overall, participants across the four groups

saw the value of a mentoring program and expressed interest in participating. Using the responses given by participants, it seems feasible that YWLP could adapt its current curriculum to meet the needs of young girls in Panama City and its surrounding areas. Taking into account the concerns of community youth leaders regarding the potential shortcomings of a mentoring program (i.e., the curriculum needs to be concrete and a contract established between participants), YWLP would need to be particularly sensitive and careful when establishing sister sites with community partners in Panama City; ensuring the new program's stability and consistency is of primary importance.

Across the four groups, participants listed teenage pregnancy, lack of sexual health education, failure to complete a high school education, and a lack of family structure and support as community based issues facing adolescent girls. Social issues related to peer pressure, discrimination based on appearance, race, and religion, substance abuse, and low self-esteem were also concerns. With more and more women entering the work force, the traditional family model is shifting. Mothers are not at home as often to watch children, provide guidance, and serve as the traditional role model. Ironically, increased career opportunities for women when compared to the previous generation may contribute to adolescent girls today receiving less guidance and support within the family unit, something participants in this study felt was related to girls' being unable to resist involvement in reckless behavior during adolescence, such as partying and sexual activity.

As mentioned, one participant from the group of potential mentors stated, "There needs to be prevention." The current YWLP curriculum is designed to serve as one such preventative program for young girls. The topics covered currently target many of the issues mentioned by participants in this study by using specific leadership guidelines that seek to combat common

issues. For example, participants concerns over discrimination could be addressed by the session where they learn how to deal with discrimination by embracing each other's differences ("Leaders embrace differences"), their concerns over dating in the session on how to be in a healthy relationship and make difficult decisions during dating ("Leaders respect themselves"), their goals to graduate and become independent in the session on how to set future goals using specific steps and timelines ("Leaders set goals"), and the failure to complete high school through the general program homework help opportunities and discussions on organizing oneself to succeed in academics, and so on. However, because the concern was mentioned with such frequency, the current curriculum would likely need to be altered to address issues specifically related to the large economic and social divide present in Panama and the shortcomings of public education. Though the specifics of the session would need to be adapted to fit this particular concern of systemic inequality, YWLP's curriculum does currently include a session dedicated to discussing issues of social injustice. This session, which encourages girls to consider how "Leaders help others" by understanding hunger in their community and beyond, and how to take specific action to address the issue (by holding a food drive), could be used as a model for a curriculum for Panamanian girls which would encourage discussion of injustices, as seen in the divide between upper and lower class citizens in their own country. In addition, the current YWLP curriculum does not address religion. Given the centrality of religion for the vast majority of the Panamanian population, and especially for private school girls, this is likely a topic that will need to be included in an adapted YWLP curriculum, perhaps as a subcategory of "Leaders connect".

Overall, there was a demonstrated interest in and need for a mentoring program for adolescent girls in Panama, such as the Young Women Leaders Program. As one participant

stated, she feels adolescent girls in Panama "need mentors!" Through continued collaboration with community partners, this study lays the foundation for establishing an YWLP "sister site" in Panama City and/or the surrounding areas. Based on prior research done evaluating the YWLP of UVA, such programs have the potential to have positive impacts on adolescent girls. Studies on the impact of YWLP on middle school girls in Virginia have found that it is highly effective. Participants showed a significant, positive change in their sense of their physical appearance and experienced greater global self-worth (Knight, Mahmoodzadegan, & Lawrence, 2000). In addition, more than 70% of the girls who participate in YWLP indicated that being a part of YWLP had changed the way they: 1) dealt with problems at home and at school, 2) supported their friends, 3) made decisions, and 4) thought about themselves and their futures (www.ywlp.virginia.edu, 2008). Should an established sister site achieve similar results, the program would be a useful initiative in addressing the issues facing adolescent girls as indicated in this study.

Furthermore, study participants indicated that, in addition to a basic mentoring model, they specifically felt an international exchange component would be useful to the girls, as it would give them an opportunity to feel solidarity with their peers and consider how girls from another part of the world make decisions. In the current YWLP Global Connections curriculum at UVA, girls are often asked to reflect on the topic of the day, for example "Leaders solve problems" and consider how the girls from their sister site solve problems, how their methods may be similar or different, and to write a letter to them explaining their thoughts. As one adolescent participant stated, she feels girls her age, "want to know if [girls in the U.S.] do the same things as we do over here. If we are the same." Having a YWLP model implemented in Panama would give girls and women the opportunity to both target a need for preventative

programming focused on addressing key issues facing adolescent girls and feed a desire to learn more about global peers, should an exchange be included as a critical component.

Limitations and Future Directions:

Conclusions from this study are limited by the small sample size and lack of quantitative data. Quantitative surveys that would allow study participants to report information regarding their level of satisfaction with the pilot program, level of interest in participating in a mentoring program, or the degree to which certain social, academic, and emotional issues impact their daily lives would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the research questions. Despite these limitations, this study adds to the limited body of research focusing on current issues facing adolescent girls in Panama. Additionally, it provides an appropriate base level of information for the UVA YWLP to proceed with further efforts to develop the global connections curriculum for participants both locally and abroad, and provide support to the two community partners in Panama who indicated interest in creating a program using the YWLP mentoring model. These additional sites would allow for further data to be gathered on the positive effects of mentoring, specifically as carried out by the YWLP, even across international borders. This and other initiatives focused on expanding YWLP's global focus may provide future researchers the opportunity to investigate the value of providing cross-cultural programming for youth who are unable to participate in international immersion programs.

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