



July 2007

Dear colleague,

This letter will provide you with the background you need to understand the origins and purposes of the *BLAST/America Learns Out of School Time Tutor, Mentor and Service Learner Action Study & Support Inventory*.

About Long Beach BLAST

Since 2000, Long Beach BLAST has placed more than 2,500 service learning college student mentors with K -12 students at risk of academic failure. Some mentors provide one-on-one tutoring and homework assistance. Others offer rich lessons in technology, science, and the arts. Service learners function as role models, opening the doors to the possibility of higher education and careers.

With 200 to 350 service learners in the field at a time and just three staff members, BLAST found it extraordinarily challenging to stay on top of mentors' successes, goals and challenges, provide mentors with support, and also collect the necessary data to measure impact and prove to funders that the organization deserves additional funding. It's one thing to have 350 mentors complete a paper-based activities log each week. It's another to find a way to quickly compile, analyze and act on the data in those logs and other evaluation-related forms.

About the Action Study & Inventory

Taking regular stock of its own monitoring, evaluation, support and communication efforts has helped BLAST to continually improve the administration of its programs. Among other outcomes, the process lead BLAST to harness the America Learns Network. Given BLAST and America Learns' passion for doing whatever it takes to ensure that children served by OST programs receive superior support, we decided to document BLAST's own evolution in the form of an action study and inventory that other organizations could learn from and use.

The Action Study & Inventory is *brutally honest*, detailing the specific challenges BLAST faced early on and noting how it addressed and continues to address them. The Inventory is also *very flexible*, giving you the ability to customize what you take stock of in the end.

To your success,

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PS: Feel free to contact either of us if your organization would like additional guidance in working through your own inventory and turning your inventory into actions and results.



OST Mentor Support Inventory

- Training -

Excited. Competent. Prepared. When volunteers arrive at your first training session, the excitement is usually there already. But how do we ensure that they're excited, competent and prepared when they leave? Successful training programs take time to create, as they're built upon and strengthened by your monitoring efforts -- learning how the program truly looks on the ground and adapting existing resources or creating new ones to help your volunteers approach reality. Strong trainings are also well-planned to ensure that volunteers don't leave overwhelmed, but instead leave confident with ready access to ongoing support resources. How can we make this happen?

Key Training Inventory	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
We require every volunteer to complete a pre-placement training that is separate from time devoted to info about logistics (applications, screening, etc.) and is an adequate length (preferably at least 1 hr).					
<u>Our training includes info about:</u> Effective methods in working with kids. Our specific objectives for volunteers. Behavior management procedures. Activities / curriculum to be used during sessions OR directions about where to access activity ideas. Our rules & policies for volunteers.					
Our training includes interactive activities that relate to information given and make the training FUN.					
Our organization trains our staff on how to effectively facilitate our pre-placement training for volunteers.					

BLAST's Training Evolution

When BLAST began, we did not have any of our own training tools, nor did we have a large budget, so we used what we could borrow from other organizations and resources from the state of California Department of Education.

Within our first year, we created a BLAST training manual using the resources available to us. This training manual was a great start for us, as it included valuable information that our volunteers needed. However, it wasn't organized in a helpful way, and much of it was written in language that was difficult for non-educators to understand. BLAST used this manual during our pre-placement training, which lasted 2 to 3 hours depending on the number of participants. Different staff had significantly different ways of doing the training, and we had only one interactive activity.



Summer 2003: We improved our training by re-working its implementation (order, amount of time spent on topics, etc.) and increasing interactive activities. Training length: 3 hours.

Summer 2004: The BLAST staff re-created the BLAST Training Manual. Through use of some sections of our old manual as well as new materials and staff written pieces, BLAST was able to create a manual that is well-organized, user-friendly, and very readable. Our training was also improved by aligning it closely with the new manual.

At this same time, BLAST created and implemented a Train-the-Trainer program to ensure effective and consistent implementation of our training amongst staff.

Currently: BLAST now makes updates and improvements to our manual each summer. We are also creating a version of our manual that will be appropriate for any program with youth-serving volunteers / mentors. It is tentatively scheduled for release in late 2006 / early 2007.



OST Mentor Support Inventory

- Training -

Once you complete the table on the other side of this page, use this table to facilitate a more in-depth analysis of your organization.

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OST Mentor Support Inventory

- *Monitoring* -

Monitoring your mentors, especially if they're serving at multiple sites, can be one of the most challenging aspects of your work. Monitoring allows you to answer the following questions: What are my mentors *really* doing? How are they using their knowledge and skills to complete the project/serve the target population? What successes are they having and how, if at all, are they sharing their successful strategies with each other? What are their most pressing challenges? What are their top goals? How are they interacting with their supervisors? How can I better support my mentors *right now* (as opposed to next semester or next year)? How am I going to show my funders that I have a solid grasp of what's going on in my program?

Key <i>Monitoring</i> Inventory	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
We're 100% certain that our mentors are always doing what they're supposed to be doing.	We're 100% certain that our mentors are always doing what they're supposed to be doing.				We lack hard any evidence on whether our mentors are doing what they're supposed to be doing.
We have access to and regularly read our mentors' reports from the field / activity logs.	We read activity logs every week.				We don't have any sort of activity log.
We adjust what we look for in our monitoring process throughout the year as we learn more about our mentors' experiences.	We incorporate new information we learn about our program into our monitoring efforts throughout the year.				We never incorporate new information we learn about our program in our monitoring efforts.
Our training and ongoing support workshops and materials are aligned with mentors' reported successes, goals and challenges, rather than <i>only</i> based on our beliefs of what they need.	We're always enhancing our training and support efforts based on our monitoring data.				We don't use any monitoring data to ensure that mentors' needs help drive the training and support process.

BLAST's *Monitoring* Evolution

BLAST's First Semester

Stats: Fewer than 15 mentors

Monitoring process: Regular phone calls with mentors

After One Year

Stats: 150 - 225 mentors per semester (300 to 450 per year) and serving 20-30 after school programs per semester.

Monitoring Process: Hard-copy session logs were filled out by mentors after each session with a student. BLAST picked up the logs once a month.

Challenge: The increase of mentors and sites increased the time it took to collect and read session logs, making the logs ineffective tools for providing timely monitoring or support.



Spring 2003 Semester:

Stats: Just under 200 mentors.

Monitoring process: Session logs continued, plus the implementation of two additional processes: 1) Weekly e-mails to volunteers with info & tips; and 2) Volunteer workshops to provide resources and to discuss activities, successes and challenges.

Spring 2004 - Spring 2007:

Stats: Approx. 250 mentors per semester

Monitoring process: Session logs were discontinued in Spring 2004. Weekly e-mails & volunteer workshops continued.

Additional monitoring process: Volunteers required to complete weekly online survey via America Learns, which provides more timely monitoring of activities and offers mentors support resources that are aligned with their individual needs.



OST Mentor Support Inventory

- *Monitoring* -

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OST Mentor Support Inventory

- Support -

Though it varies by program, mentors usually need more support beyond an initial training session. Finding the best ongoing support medium is tough. Many mentors do not have time to read guidebooks, participate in e-mail listserv discussions or use online bulletin boards. On top of that, regular classroom time and on-site support aren't always sufficient: it's difficult to cover each mentor's issues and not all mentors are comfortable sharing their challenges. How do you create a culture in which mentors are comfortable sharing their goals and challenges *while* providing targeted support when the mentors aren't able to find resources on their own?

Key Support Inventory	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Our mentors report that they are comfortable sharing their goals and challenges with program staff AND they do share those goals and challenges regularly.					
We're aware of the types of support resources our mentors are willing to use, and we're aware of our mentors' preferred support resource delivery media (e.g., guidebooks, videos, e-mail, Web services, workshops).					
We capitalize on our ongoing monitoring process to support each of our mentors before their goals and challenges lose relevance, and we evaluate whether mentors find the support useful.					
Recognizing that mentors can often offer the best support to other mentors, we facilitate learner-learner sharing and learning opportunities.					

BLAST's Support Evolution

After BLAST began involving over 150 mentors each semester, we found it challenging to offer helpful support to its mentors. Our staff struggled with knowing what volunteers were doing and in providing resources to respond to their needs in a timely manner.

BLAST made workshops available for support, but they were not well-attended and topics were based on what BLAST thought would be helpful to volunteers.

Additional resources were provided to individual volunteers upon request.



Fall 2003: BLAST made changes to its workshops, using feedback from previous semesters to determine topics, and requiring that each volunteer attend at least one of the workshops offered. Volunteers whose schedules prevented them from attending a workshop were required to make the time up by spending extra time with their mentee.

When BLAST fully implemented the America Learns Network, it dramatically changed our ability to provide targeted, effective support. BLAST now uses America Learns survey responses to determine workshop topics, and volunteers receive instant support targeted to their individual challenges each week — as soon as they complete their America Learns surveys.



OST Mentor Support Inventory

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OST Mentor Support Inventory

- Communication -

We want mentors to leave the program telling others that the experience of serving was not only incredible, but that you (the program staff person) are incredible. One ingredient for success is communicating effectively with your mentors. Aside from keeping them abreast of program developments, regular, succinct communication should let the mentors know that they are valued, community assets. It is possible, however, *to communicate too much, too often*. New printing and electronic communications technologies allow us to send out a ton of useless information to our mentors as well, which may have one of many of the following impacts: annoyance with the program, choices to not read anything, feelings that staff does not value their time. Where's the balance?

Key Communication Inventory	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Our mentors know that we value their work and effort.					
We survey all or a sample of our mentors on our communication practices (number, content, and distribution method of communications), and align our practices with that data whenever possible.					
We respect our mentors' busy lives and don't take them by surprise. We inform them of required events and activities outside their scheduled class time and service time at least one week in advance.					
Mentors working with children are well aware of any mandatory child safety or endangerment reporting required of our program.					

BLAST's Communication Evolution

Because of the number of volunteers that BLAST places, staff has faced challenges of finding ways to effectively communicate with our mentors.

There have been times in the past when BLAST had little face-to-face contact with volunteers, and times when e-mails had been infrequent (sometime no e-mail communication with volunteers, sometimes too much).

Additionally, the BLAST website lacked information about our organization and had no information targeted to active mentors (e.g., resources, workshop schedules).



BLAST now sends weekly Volunteer Updates via e-mail, which allows consistent communication without overload. BLAST also improved our site visit strategy (staff visit each site at least once a month), and we use workshops as an opportunity for face-to-face contact. BLAST's website has been under constant improvement and now includes an "Active Volunteer Center" where volunteers can get program information and access resources.

America Learns interviews a sample of BLAST mentors to ensure that the survey reminders the Network sends are "just right" in length and content. The Network acts as another weekly point of contact, and provides BLAST with an additional space for program announcements.



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OST Mentor Support Inventory

- *Evaluation Culture* -

A commitment to meaningful program evaluation involves more than collecting, analyzing and reporting out data. Meaningful evaluations include an intent to *act* on your evaluation findings, and to act on findings soon after they're discovered. Reaching this point involves more than creating logic models; it actually first requires a culture that's open to constantly checking in with your program's strengths and weaknesses. It also takes staff members who are eager to capitalize on current data and to take action on it. Use these criteria to check in with your program's evaluation culture.

Key <i>Evaluation Culture</i> Inventory	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
We're committed to constantly discovering the strengths and weaknesses of our program, evaluating the program as if our mentors were directly affecting ourselves and our own families.					
If we're administering the evaluation, we've asked an outside expert to screen and rid our data collection tools of unintended biases.					
We act on the evaluation data we analyze during and between program cycles. (We don't let it sit on a bookshelf or on the hard drive).					
We've created a plan to quickly transfer our <i>evaluation institutional memory</i> (data collection processes, results and associated actions) to new program staff when they come on board so that they can quickly understand our program's evolution.					

BLAST's *Evaluation Culture* Evolution

When BLAST was founded, evaluation was one of the key areas that received early attention. Thus, BLAST has always had a very stringent evaluation process.

The first evaluation was completed on BLAST's work at our two largest sites. The evaluation was completed by an outside evaluator. The evaluation included pre- and post-assessments of students, mentors and classroom teachers. Each year, BLAST looked at its evaluation process and made improvements, including extension of our evaluation process to all sites, volunteers, and children in our second year of service. .

Challenges: To use its evaluation tools to bring about more immediate program Improvements, made difficult by the capacity of a small staff.

Challenge Response:

BLAST implemented an annual staff retreat. The two-day retreat allowed staff to examine all areas of our program and processes and identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Summer 2004: The annual staff retreat was extended to five days, offering an environment to rigorously evaluate all programs and processes, and to create implementation plans for significant changes based on staff discussion and our evaluation data. This also provided an opportunity to discuss possible changes to our evaluation process.

In 2004, BLAST also began using data collected from volunteers' America Learns surveys to make programmatic improvements in our workshops and trainings, and as supplemental material for fund development and evaluation. BLAST's 2005-2006 evaluation utilized data from our America Learns surveys as a part of our annual evaluation.



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