

# Vocational Peer Mentors: Perspectives of Early Emerging Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

---

Vanessa Vorhies, LCSW, PhD Candidate

Kathryn Sabella, MA

Marsha Ellison, PhD

Marc Fagan, PsyD



**THRESHOLDS**

# Acknowledgements

The Transitions RTC aims to improve the supports for youth and young adults, ages 14-30, with serious mental health conditions who are trying to successfully complete their schooling and training and move into rewarding work lives. We are located at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, Department of Psychiatry, Center for Mental Health Services Research.

Visit us at:

<http://labs.umassmed.edu/transitionsRTC/index.htm>

*The contents of this presentation were developed with funding from the US Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (NIDRR grant H133B090018). Additional funding provided by UMass Medical School's Commonwealth Medicine division. The content of this presentation does not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.*



# Background

- Estimated 5 million emerging adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) in the US
- Unique developmental stage of life
- Struggle to succeed in all aspects of life, especially in employment and educational attainment
- Social capital may be diminished
- Vulnerable subgroups



# Promising Practices

## 1. Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

- Supported Employment
- Employment specialists + clinical team
- Adapted for 1<sup>st</sup> episode psychosis:  
Addition of Supported Education
- Feasibility paper currently under review

## 2. Use of Peers

- Evidence of benefits among older adults with SMI and other at-risk youth
- Peer influence is high
- Focus group study: need for role models



# Current study

- Test feasibility of adapted IPS:  
**supported employment + supported education  
with the use of near-age vocational peer mentors**
  - Single group mixed method pre-post feasibility study
- 

Thresholds Young Adult Program (YAP) in Chicago

**THRESH****OLDS**

---

## Today's goals:

1. Describe vocational peer mentors
2. Explore the relational processes at work
3. Identify valued characteristics of peer mentors

# Near-age peer mentoring

## Peer qualifications:

- Self-identified as having a SMHC
- Experience in YAP or other service systems
- High school graduate with employment or post-secondary school history

## 40 hours of training:

- Increase knowledge of IPS model
- Learn how to share story
- Build active-listening skills



# Vocational Peer Mentors

- **Work closely with education and employment specialists**
- Provide emotional support & **validation**
- **Engage** young people in vocational services
- **Support** young people in exploring worlds of work & school
- **Teach**, role-model, and **coach** professionalism, maintaining hygiene, and having appropriate boundaries



- 1-6 mentees per mentor
- Weekly meetings in the community



# Measures

1. Open ended peer mentor satisfaction survey
  - Satisfaction with peer mentor experience
  - Valued peer mentor characteristics
  - Impact of peer mentors

Thematic coding led to two cohorts:

- Positive peer mentor experience
- Negative, mixed, or no opinion peer mentor experience

2. Working Alliance Inventory-Short Form (WAI-S)

- 12 item self-report



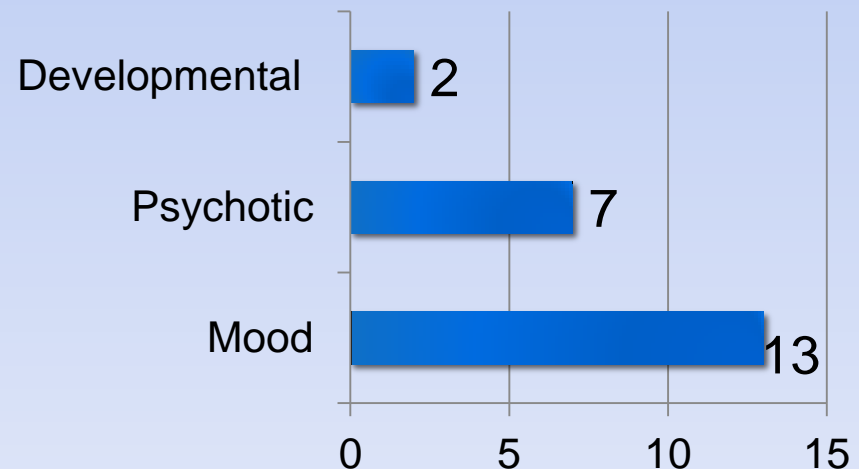


# Study participants

35 study participants, 22 with satisfaction data

- Mean age 17.27 years (range 17-20)
- 14 female, 8 male
- 18 African American, 2 Latino, 2 White
- Only 2 high school graduates/GED
- 13 previously employed

Primary Diagnoses



# Overview of Findings

- Peer Mentor Demographics
- Valued Peer Mentor *Characteristics*
- Valued Peer Mentoring *Experiences*
- Overall Perceived Benefit
- Working Alliance



# Peer Mentor Demographics

- Peer Mentors..... 13 total
- Age Range..... 20-30 yrs old
- Race/Ethnicity..... 9/13 African American
- Supplemental Security Income..... 10/13
- “Aged out” of Child Welfare System..... 9/13
- HS Diploma or Equivalent..... 11/13
- Post-Secondary Education..... 9/13



# Valued Peer Mentor Characteristics

- “Strong,” “positive,” “honest,” & “trustworthy”
- Have similar life experiences and a capacity to empathize
- Having “overcome” personal struggles



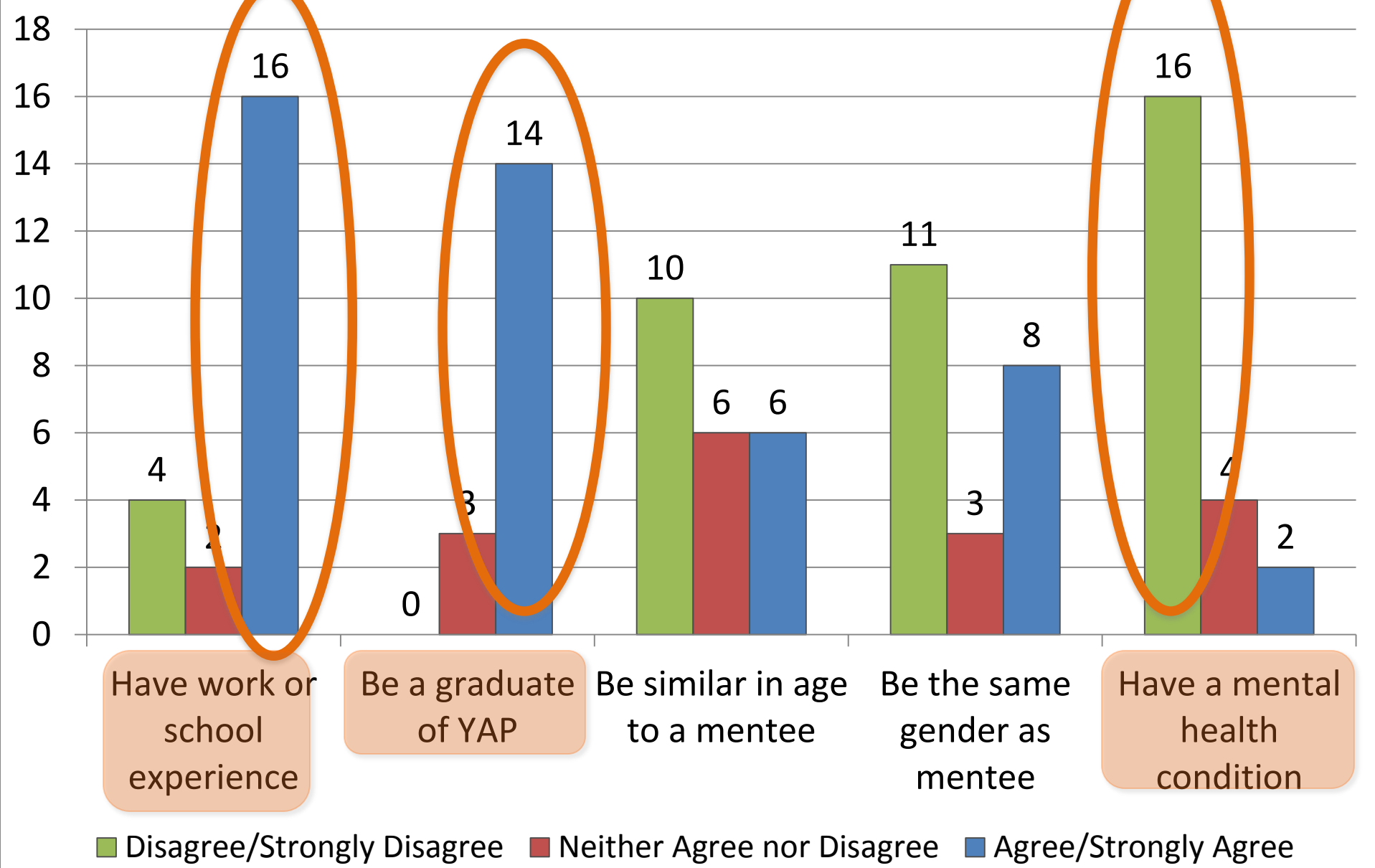
# In young people's own words

*"[My peer mentor is]...trustworthy. I could talk to him about everything."*

*"she [peer mentor] didn't look at me differently...she didn't put on a phony act."*

*"someone who was one of us... they can talk about their life, how they get through it and show us how to do it."*





# Valued Peer Mentoring Experiences

- Receipt of advice
- Feeling related to & understood
- Opportunity to “talk” & be heard
- Relationship Building
- Trust & Safety



# In young people's own words

*"[My peer mentor] understands where I am coming from and I understand where she is coming from."*

*"I felt safe and listened to."*

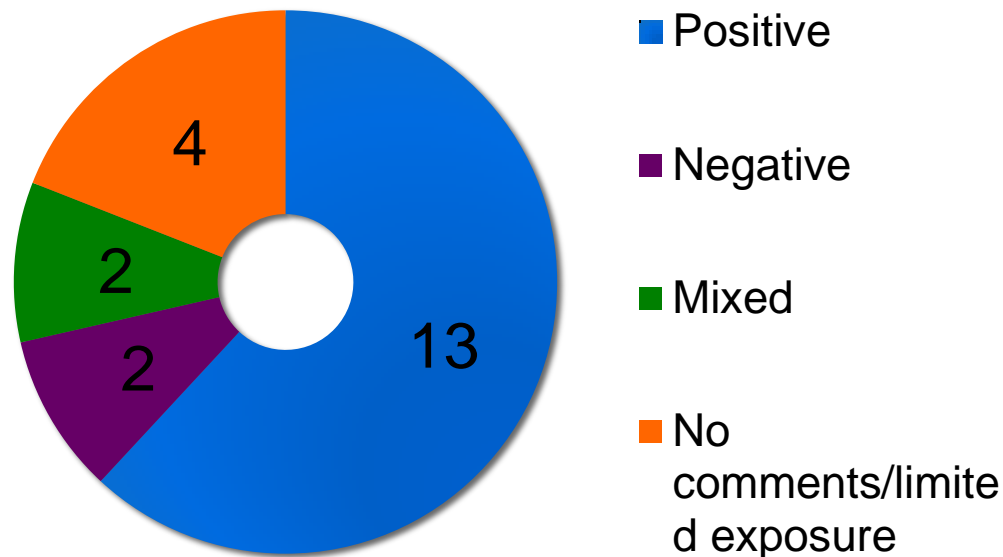
*"[we] talked about my job and how important it was that I keep it...but it was also a bond."*



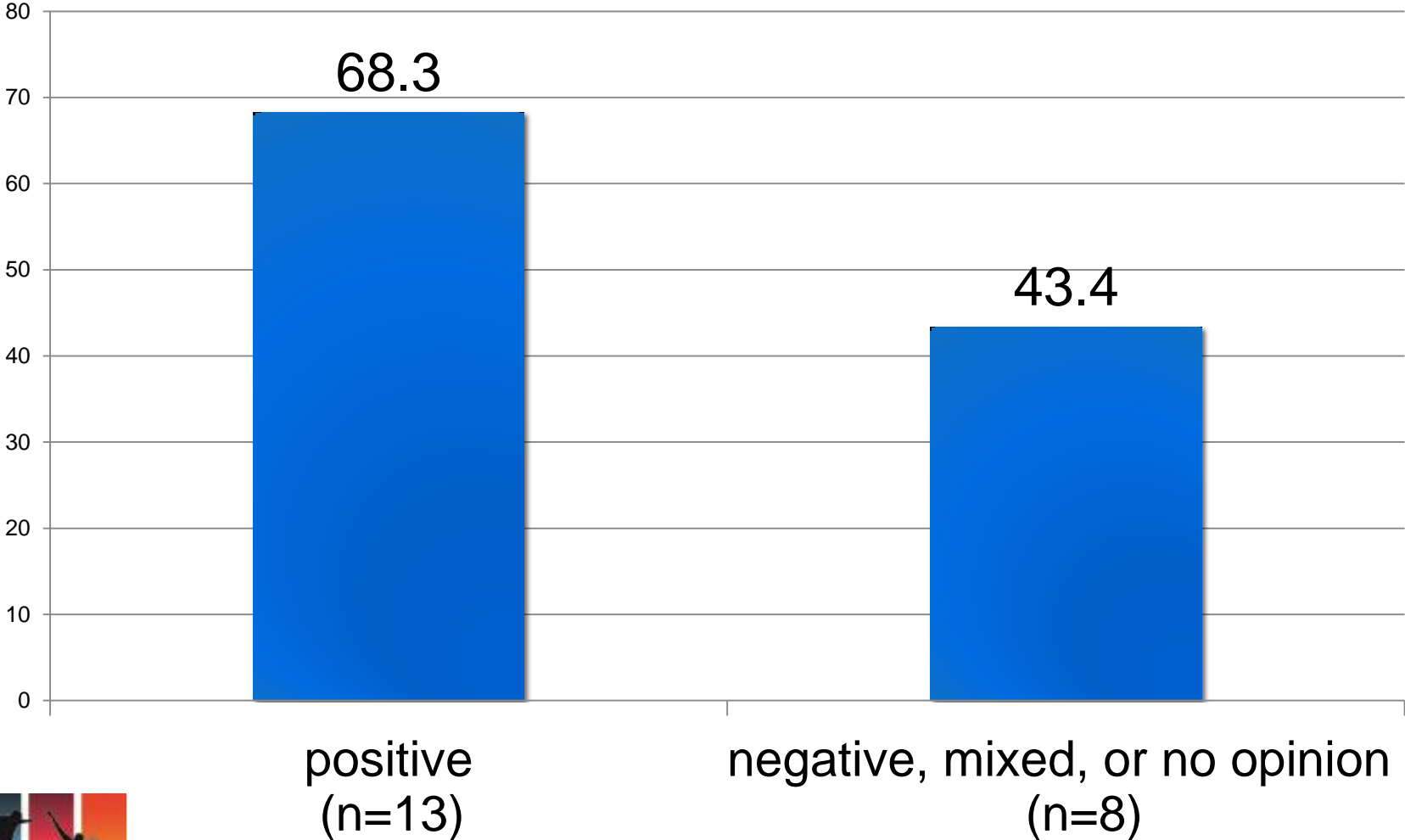


# Overall Perceived Benefit

- 16 cited benefits
  - Vocational goal achievement
  - Increased self-awareness and agency
  - Job search and interview support
  - Assistance in connecting with vocational team
- Breakdown of Overall Perceptions (n=21)



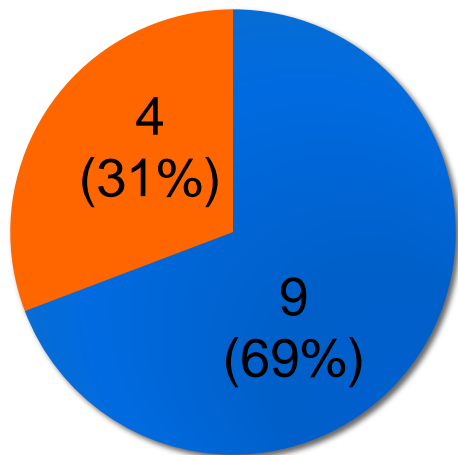
# Working Alliance



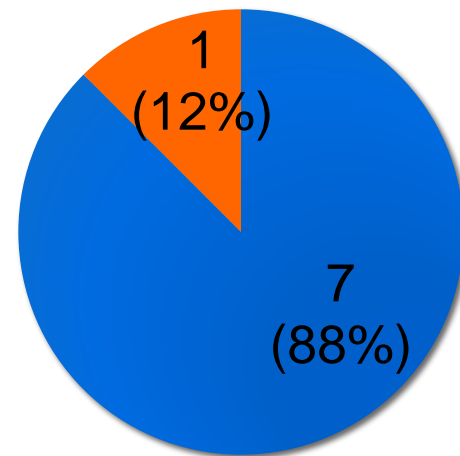
Mann-Whitney U=14.0, p =0.006, sig ≤0, 2-tailed

# Vocational Attainment

Positive Experience  
(n=13)



Negative, Mixed, No opinion  
(n=8)



■ Yes  
■ No



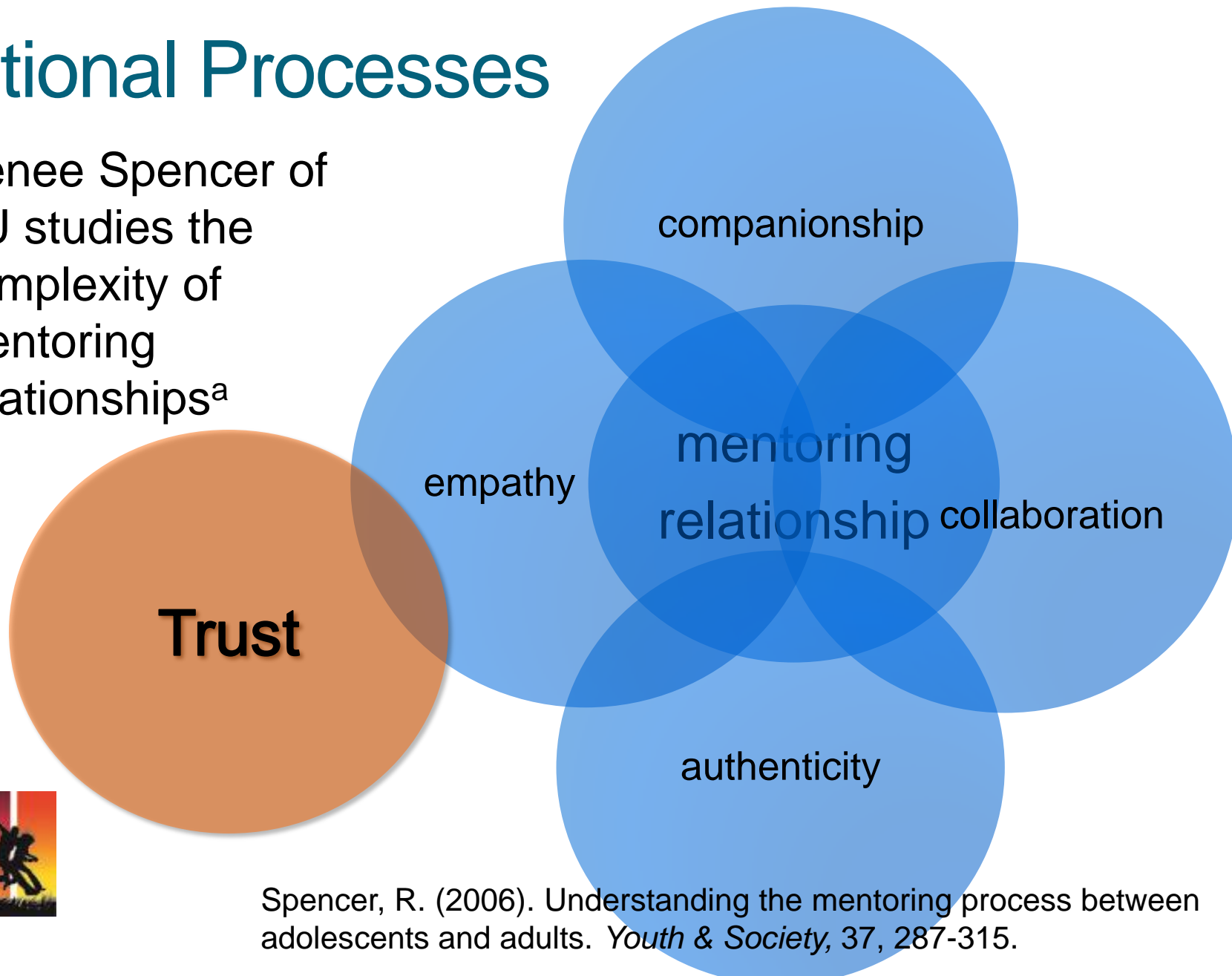
# Promising practice...

- Value & Benefit
- Vocational specialist relationship
- Delayed vocational development



# Relational Processes

- Renee Spencer of BU studies the complexity of mentoring relationships<sup>a</sup>



Spencer, R. (2006). Understanding the mentoring process between adolescents and adults. *Youth & Society*, 37, 287-315.

# Defining & Expanding “Peer”

- Peer support theory
- Shared-life experiences
- Stigma & development

...psychiatric residential program grad, not having a SMHC...



# Practice Implications – Lessons Learned

- High rates of turnover
- Broadened criteria for hiring
- Near age rather than same age peers (further in recovery)
- Greater clarification of role



# Practice Implications

- Training needs
- Connection with vocational team
- Clinical support
- Meetings in the community
- Peers needed cars/computers/phone
- Incentives for mentee meetings
- Funding – Medicaid Peer Specialists





# Thank you!

- Contact us:
  - Vanessa Vorhies Klodnick, LCSW at Thresholds  
Vanessa.Vorhies@thresholds.org
  - Kathryn Sabella, MA at Transitions RTC  
Kathryn.Sabella@umassmed.edu
  - Marsha Langer Ellison, PhD at Transitions RTC  
Marsha.Ellison@umassmed.edu
  - Marc A. Fagan, PsyD at Thresholds Youth Programs  
Marc.Fagan@thresholds.org

