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# Identity and Integrity: The Conduit of Vulnerability between High-Risk Youth and Mentors

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## Youth Comments

"You all, the Spark college people, are just very nice, have stuff in common with each other, and like to talk a lot. That's a good thing too. You're just fun to be around."

"I don't really have a label to fit into, a group, but I like to just be my own person."

"If I wasn't in this program, I know that I would be in jail."



## Student Comments

"It's amazing to me. This whole time the SPARK kids thought we were helping them out, but truth be told, they were helping us out!"

"I came into it with a lot of baggage. This past year, I had finally come to the conclusion that I needed to get out of my comfort zone in order to become the teacher, writer, and person I wanted to be."

"The SPARK program taught me there's still a lot I need to learn about myself before I can get in a classroom, but I think it got me a lot closer to the real ME. I was starting to think I lost her."

"We didn't tell them what was right and what was wrong, we told them what we did and who we really are. They thought we were some really cool, interesting figures, and we thought that we're just like them."

"I LOVED the vibe in the room. Week after week I went back, I could see the walls that the kids had AND the walls that my fellow SPARK interns had begun to fall."

**SPARK History:** SPARK began in 2009 at UWG. It emerged after conversations between the Juvenile Court Judge, Peterson and students at UWG about providing an alternative intervention program for youth living in high-risk settings.

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An emerging mentoring program at the University of West Georgia that give teens **hope** who come to us from "**high-risk**" settings. The SPARK program also provides **pre-service teachers** the opportunity of interacting with youth who are currently on probation and not faring well at home or at school.



## What is SPARK?

**SPARK** is a 10-week mentoring program where UWG students and youth from high-risk backgrounds come together and co-create a community that utilizes ice-breakers, West African drumming, art, inspirational speakers, and fellowship to create a safe space for everyone to learn from one another.

## The Problem

Challenging youth and educators often find themselves in a struggle for survival and are unable to resolve differences. Their cries are too often ignored while the crises in their lives continue to grow. Many of these youth are ending up in the Juvenile Justice System where judges have few options that are aimed at helping them get back in school and live productive lives. Too many educators do not have the training or experience required to meet their needs.



## SPARK Mission

To inspire **hope** in the lives of youth that are on probation or have appeared in the juvenile courts, ages 12 to 18, through an emerging, transformative community-based mentoring program.

## What we do

SPARK unites struggling youth with UWG students in a campus classrooms 10 weeks for:

- icebreakers
- sharing life stories (COSMOS)
- inspirational guests
- see youth as sacred
- African drumming
- art projects
- reflective questions
- games and refreshments
- forming authentic friends
- dissolve the disconnect

We focus on creating a nonjudgmental, safe environment, **igniting a spark** in the youth that motivates them from within.

## Objectives include:

- Reduce recidivism and prevent them from becoming adult offenders;
- Spark interest in vocational and educational pursuits;
- Inspire hope that things can change;
- Provide the youth with a positive view of themselves while helping them rediscover their own voice;
- Spark a desire to reengage in their educational pursuits and respond to issues in their lives in a constructive way;
- Prepare UWG pre-service teachers to meet some of the challenges they will face with youth in the classroom;
- Reconciling the differences between pre-service teachers and struggling youth;
- Learning more about themselves;
- Learning how to form healthy, meaningful relationships.

