The Riepe College House Mentor Program was created in 2002 by Professor John Fantuzzo, Faculty Fellow. It is now in its eight year. The Mentor Program model is one of community-to-community, reciprocal service. The goal is to connect two communities through service to academically at-risk students; these connections are designed to serve both communities. The first community includes a special group of Penn freshmen, a Graduate Associate, and a Professor and his family who all live together on a common hall in Riepe College House at the University of Pennsylvania. The second community consists of the students and faculty from Wilson Elementary School, which is a public elementary school in West Philadelphia; Wilson is a special school that is under the direction of the University of Pennsylvania in partnership with the School District of Philadelphia based on its past state achievement scores. Connections are made by first building community in residence with freshmen who seek to do community service and want to live with other freshmen who share common commitments to service and learning. Then in partnership with the educators, children, and families from the Wilson Elementary School community, a genuine place is created for the Penn Mentors to provide one-to-one or small group tutoring services to students in need of extra support and to participate in the life of the elementary school and the surrounding community.

The Mentor Program involves approximately 25 freshmen, 1 Graduate Associate (GA), and 1 Faculty Fellow who directs the program. The GA is the GA for the Mentor Hall and receives room and board and a small stipend for some extra time spent supporting Mentors at the elementary school. Students write essays as part of an application process to be a Mentor. The Faculty Fellow and GA select the students to be in the program based on essays and personal contacts. Mentors come to campus for a full day of orientation and training before New Student Orientation to learn the basics of tutoring and to begin their development as a residential community.

Each semester Mentors spend approximately 9-10 weeks mentoring at the Wilson Elementary School. Each visit is about 2 hours including transportation (3-4 minute trolley ride—which provides door-to-door service). Students travel in small teams based on their schedules. Schedules are carefully worked out to make sure that they do not conflict with classes and that they provide the student with plenty of time to get to and from campus without being pressed/stressed. Students do not mentor during the first part of the semester, mid-semester, or before finals. This is to ensure that the Mentoring experience does not compete with the most intense academic times in the semester (selection of classes, mid-terms, and finals). Students learn life lessons of managing their time and keeping their commitments. The GA is typically a graduate student with a career interest in education or vulnerable populations (Graduate School of Education or School of Social Policy and Practice). Typically the GA has a placement at the school (related to their graduate program—e.g., student teaching or school social work) and therefore can monitor the Mentors’ progress and inform Dr. Fantuzzo of any issues that require problem solving. Dr. and Mrs. Fantuzzo open their apartment on a weekly basis to support the Mentor community. Mentors come together and discuss their experiences at Wilson working with their students—frustrations, disconnects, and victories are shared and processed in an informal atmosphere over brownies and popcorn. Based on these discussions, Dr. Fantuzzo brings in special speakers to help the students learn more about the West Philadelphia community, strategies to work more effectively with children, and to provide them with support for their budding career interests. There is a small budget that covers orientation, trolley tokens, child abuse checks for school volunteers and a small stipend for the GA’s extra time.

In addition to Mentoring, the Mentor Community participates in special school programs (e.g., Parents Night). Additionally the Mentors organize community service projects for their entire College House to participate in during the fall and spring semesters (Philly Cares Day and Martin Luther King Day). One long-term special project that the Riepe Mentor Program has been involved in is working to keep the Wilson School Library open. Insufficient funds for books and library personnel threatened closure. This was particularly problematic since there was no library in school catchment area. Mentors have organized book drives and have contributed many volunteer hours to keep the library open and now it is in full use for the students.

For more information and a copy of the 2008-2009 Annual Report of the Mentor program contact Dr. Fantuzzo.