

## Perspectives of Peer Mentors Supporting Inclusive Higher Education

By Erik W. Carter

As the inclusive higher education movement continues to grow, questions remain about how best to support the involvement of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in all aspects of campus life—both within and beyond the college classroom. Although program staff and faculty can be critical, the need for more natural sources of support must also be emphasized. Fellow college students can play a variety of roles in supporting students with intellectual disability to access a wide range of campus experiences, including classes, student organizations, volunteer experiences, residential life, work, and spending time with friends. Indeed, most programs in the United States draw heavily on this ubiquitous and natural avenue of support.

A small collection of studies has described the roles of peer mentors on diverse campuses (e.g., Culnane, Eisenman, & Murphy, 2016; Farley, Gibbons, & Cihak, 2014; Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, & Hodapp, 2016; Izzo & Shuman, 2013). Yet, few studies have focused on the factors that draw peer mentors to this role. Which students volunteer to serve as peer mentors? What factors lead them to get involved in this particular campus opportunity? What benefits do peer mentors anticipate? What expectations do they hold for their fellow college students with intellectual disability? These are just a few of the questions we addressed in this multi-campus study.

### METHOD

Participants were 250 college students without IDD enrolled at five universities in Tennessee with inclusive postsecondary programs. We developed and distributed an online survey addressing the following areas: (a) personal demographics, (b) motivations for their involvement, (c) past disability experiences, (d) anticipated benefits, (e) expectations for students with IDD, and (f) program feedback. The study invitation was sent shortly after each student signed up as a peer

mentor at their campus. The overall participation rate was 63%.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### WHO CHOOSES TO BECOME PEER MENTORS

Compared with overall undergraduate enrollment, peer mentors were more likely to be female (81% vs. 57%) and White (78% vs. 65%). The majority (84%) reported GPAs of 3.0 or higher and most students (82%) were not majoring in education. Almost all (94%) peer mentors had prior disability-related experiences.

#### WHAT FACTORS MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO BECOME PEER MENTORS?

Most agreed or strongly agreed that alignment with personal values (94%), the likelihood the experience would be fun (91%), a desire to give back to the community (88%), an interest in learning more about disabilities (77%), personal ties to people with disabilities (69%), alignment with religious values (55%), and alignment with future career plans (54%) were influential factors. Motivations reflecting external contingencies (e.g., earning extra income, receiving course credit, meeting a program requirement) were identified by a much smaller percentage of peer mentors. Nearly all peers said multiple factors shaped their decision to get involved.

#### WHAT BENEFITS DO PEER MENTORS ANTICIPATE EXPERIENCING?

The items most likely to receive ratings of agree or strongly agree related to developing new friendships (99%), developing greater appreciation of diversity (97%), becoming more comfortable interactions (97%), having fun (97%), becoming a better advocate (97%), and becoming more informed about the challenges and barriers faced by people with IDD (99%). The items least likely to receive high ratings were expectations related to decreasing their stress levels (41%), improving their grades (33%), improving their study skills (33%), and

improving their social status on campus (20%).

## WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO PEER MENTORS HOLD FOR STUDENTS WITH IDD?

Most peer mentors said they agree or strongly agree that students with IDD could develop a strong friendship network on campus (96%), participate in service and volunteer projects (97%), hold an on-campus job or internship (95%), participate in clubs and student organization (91%), navigate around the campus independently (89%), hold an off-campus job or internship (87%), and participate in college classes (78%). Expectations for after graduation were somewhat lower and more mixed. Peer mentors said they agree or strongly agree that students with IDD could work in a part-time job in the community (96%), experience a high quality of life (94%), have a strong network of friends (93%), and work in a full-time job in the community (78%).

## IMPLICATIONS

Supporting full access to higher education for students with IDD requires a constellation of supports—both formal and informal. This study provides helpful insights into the characteristics, motivations, and expectations of peer mentors within inclusive higher education. Our findings have several implications for practice:

- The wide range of disciplines represented by peer mentors suggests a fairly broad pool of students may be available to draw upon as potential supports.
- The breadth of individualized factors that led peers to get involved suggests that recruiting efforts should highlight diverse aspects of the peer mentoring experience.
- If one goal of programs is to shift attitudes and expectations of peers, additional recruitment approaches may be needed to reach students who lack prior connections to disability.
- Cross-site collaborations like this one can help answer research questions that really require sample sizes that exceed those available at a single campus.

We hope our findings will spur future research aimed at identifying how best to develop and deploy this powerful source of peer-mediated support.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please see this journal article: Carter, E. W., Gustafson, J. R., Mackay, M. M., Martin, K., Parisey, M., Graves, J., Day, T., McCabe, L., Lazarz, H., McMillan, E., Beeson, T., Schiro-Geist, C., Williams, M., & Cayton, J. (2018). Motivations and expectations of peer mentors within inclusive higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*. advanced online publication. doi:10.1177/2165143418779989

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