

The Use of Peer Mentors to Facilitate the Inclusion of Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in postsecondary education opportunities for young adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) (Hart, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2005; Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). The success of inclusion for these students in the K-12 years, combined with rising parent expectations for further education and renewed legislative focus on postsecondary education as a viable and desired outcome for all students, has fueled this interest (Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Praker, 2004; Sitlington, 2003). In response, a small but growing number of postsecondary institutions have opened their doors to these non-traditional students (Hart, et al., 2005; Neubert, et al., 2001).

Post-secondary education and training are essential components of the preparation of young adults with disabilities to become successful, interdependent members of our communities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996, Wittenburg, Golden, & Fishman, 2002). Despite the impressive gains that youth with disabilities have made in many post-secondary outcomes, youth with IDD continue to lag behind other youth with disabilities in their participation in this important area of transition to adult life (Ferguson & Blumberg, 2002). It is estimated that while 78% of high school graduates enter into some form of post-secondary education, only 37% of youth with disabilities have this experience (Wittenburg, et al., 2002) and students with significant disabilities, ages 18-21 years, participate at a significantly lower rate of between 4-17% (Page & Chadsey-Rusch, 1995). Problems with academic learning frequently co-occur with emotional and behavioral disorders (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000). Individuals with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experience more problems with social adjustment than other groups of people with disabilities (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992). Students with EBD are less likely to complete, or even pursue, a post-second-

ary program (Malmgren, Edgar & Neel, 1998).

There are numerous potential benefits for students with IDD who participate in a meaningful learning experience in post-secondary settings (Grigal, Neubert & Moon, 2002). Research on employment indicates that youth with disabilities who receive post-secondary education are more likely to be competitively employed and obtain higher earnings over time than their peers who do not have this experience (Gilmore, Schuster, Zafft, & Hart, 2001). Zafft and colleagues (2002) further demonstrated that participation in a post-secondary program for students with significant disabilities correlated positively with student employment outcomes, competitiveness, and independence. Other stated goals for post-secondary initiatives include the development of self-determination skills and the promotion of social interaction between students with IDD and their typical college-age peers (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001).

The Career and Community Studies Program at the College of New Jersey

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), a state college located in suburban, central New Jersey, is primarily an undergraduate, residential school, with approximately 5000 undergraduates and about 800 graduate students. Fully a quarter of the undergraduates students are in programs leading to teacher certification while the remainder are in various arts, science, and professional schools. The mission statement of the college states that "The College prepares students to excel in their chosen fields and to create, preserve, and transmit knowledge, arts, and wisdom," and this belief is reflected in the number and rigor of liberal learning courses required of all students at the College.

The Career and Community Studies (CCS) program at TCNJ is a liberal studies program designed to prepare 18-25 year old students with IDD for adult life, including career exploration and preparation, peer interaction, and liberal

learning. The program's core beliefs include the idea that access to liberal learning promotes the development of critical thinking, self-reflection, and an understanding of the inter-relatedness required for civic responsibility.

CCS was developed after a 2003 pilot demonstration project demonstrated the effectiveness of engaging students with IDD in college-related social and employment training opportunities. It was found that students with and without disabilities evaluated the experience positively and saw the college campus community as a welcoming environment. This experience, our research into existing program models, and our commitment to inclusion at all levels of education, led to the birth of CCS. Subsequently, a grant from the National Downs Syndrome Society assisted in the development of the current full time course of study.

Current thinking about intellectual functioning has focused upon the ability of individuals to create ideas from lived experience, to reflect upon them, and to understand them in the context of other ideas (Greenspan, 1997). In designing the CCS program, it was our hope that, within the context of the college coursework and with peers of similar age, these experiences could be explored and connected to academic content in a meaningful way by students with IDD. We assumed that with adaptation of instruction and evaluation, and given reasonable accommodations, e.g., mentor support and technology, students with IDD could be successfully included in a variety of undergraduate courses.

We anticipated that some of our students would present with co-occurring emotional and behavioral disorders. We believed that the provision of positive behavioral support, including social skills instruction, modeling and rehearsal, would help students learn age appropriate social skills, and adaptive alternatives to problem behaviors.

The CCS Course of Study

In keeping with TCNJ's focus on a well-rounded education for all, we chose not to create a transition program with a narrow focus on housing and employment, as is often the case in existing offerings for young adults. Rather, we hoped to create an inclusive community that could support young adults with disabilities through the developmental process of the transition to adulthood and to offer them a content-rich liberal education that would support them as lifelong learners and as citizens. We believed that a college campus could

serve as a supportive environment where young adults could develop an understanding of themselves in the context of their peers and, through exposure to the various academic disciplines, develop the skills and dispositions necessary to become interdependent adults. We believed that participation in this kind of higher education could be as transformative for young adults with IDD as we have seen it be for cohort after cohort of typically admitted college students.

The Mission of the CCS program is to provide a coordinated and comprehensive course of study that includes career exploration and preparation, self awareness, discovery, and personal improvement, through a framework of liberal learning and community participation. The Mission of CCS is supported by the following objectives:

- To provide transition services and study skills to transitioning high school students.
- To provide a four year post-secondary experience for young adults who have completed high school.
- To use principles of universal design to make typical coursework accessible.
- To provide reasonable and appropriate accommodations to make coursework accessible and ensure student success.
- To assist students to engage in career exploration and vocational preparation through specifically designed coursework, job sampling, and internships.
- To facilitate the academic learning and social integration of Students with IDD through the support of trained, volunteer peer mentors.
- To provide training in assistive technology to assist students to access college coursework, and to develop technology knowledge and skills that will enhance career development and community participation.

The Use of Peer Mentors

Early in the development of the CCS program, we shared a commitment to facilitating social learning and academic support through the use of peer mentors. This made sense to us because we needed to rely on mentors to supplement program staffing and because we saw mentors as the key to the full and meaningful inclusion of students with IDD on our campus.

Peer mentoring is widely used to enhance inclusive education in K-12 settings. It has been suggested that when students receive instruction from peers, they demonstrate improved acquisition of social and academic skills (Prater, Bruhl

& Serna, 1998). Students in peer-mediated programs demonstrate improvements in self-concept, social skills, understanding of human difference and tolerance of differences, and development of social relationships (Kamps, Kravits, Stolz, & Swaggart, 1998). Peer mentors provide a variety of useful functions including social/emotional support, role modeling, skill acquisition, information, and advice. Peer-mentor relationships provide both instrumental and emotional support. Instrumental support involves information about how to do something as well as assistance in completing a difficult task. Emotional support may involve modeling, teaching problem solving strategies, and offering ways to express or manage difficult feelings (Hagner, 2000; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

We felt confident that the potential benefits of mentoring for students with IDD in the CCS program would be many. We also were intrigued by the mutually enhancing benefits of the mentoring relationship we'd seen documented in the literature, and wondered what the experience of being a mentor would do to enhance the learning and development of typically admitted students. We were especially interested in learning about ways that mentoring could improve the preparation of our teacher candidates.

The *More Than Mentors* program was established within the CCS program to provide students with IDD academic and social support. Initially, peer mentors were recruited through undergraduate and graduate courses offered in the School of Education and through flyers posted throughout the education building. Mentors were asked to complete an application and were interviewed by program staff. Peer mentors were provided with an orientation to mentoring; given an overview of the goals, services and structure of the CCS program; and were introduced to the students. Peer mentors attended CCS core courses and accompanied CCS students during lunch and social-recreational activities.

At first, the response to our mentor recruitment efforts was modest, yielding less than a dozen peer mentors who volunteered a few hours of their time each week. However, as typical students got to know the students with disabilities through participation in inclusive courses taught by CCS core faculty such as Freshman Seminar, Internship 1 and Introduction to Educational Psychology, more typically admitted undergraduate and graduate students volunteered for the *More than Mentors* program. By the end of the first year of the program, more than 50 students

from across departments within the College had volunteered to serve as mentors.

During our second year, more than 50 undergraduate and graduate students have served as peer mentors. In addition to our initial methods of recruiting mentors, we have found that mentors are effectively recruited via student associations, e.g., Best Buddies, Sororities, Sports Teams, Clubs such as Anime, through Departmentally required Internships, through CCS sponsored social activities such as our annual "poetry slam", through incidental social interaction, and through "word of mouth." Specially designed inclusive courses such as "Great Conversations" and "The Finer Things" have created comfortable and interesting vehicles for shared learning and the development of meaningful social relationships between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

Each semester, we conduct evaluations of the *More than Mentors* program. These evaluations have helped us to learn about the meaning and value of peer mentoring for typically admitted students, and we have used evaluation data to improve the design and quality of the *More than Mentors* program. The Mentor Evaluation questionnaire asks students who have served as mentors to provide the following information: (a) personal demographic information; (b) to tell us how they learned about the program; and (c) to provide an overall assessment of the program including their satisfaction with preparation/training and support from program staff. Perhaps the most significant information we gather from mentors is their assessment of their satisfaction with the experience of being a mentor, their assessment of how the experience has affected them personally, and what they have learned about themselves and people with disabilities. Some of the effects of peer mentoring that have emerged from our Mentor Evaluation data include: (a) mentors gaining an appreciation of students with intellectual disabilities as capable of participating in and benefiting from post-secondary education; (b) mentors gaining an understanding of the mentor role and seeing themselves as effective mentors; (c) mentors learning about Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and effective instruction and support, and (d) mentors developing satisfying relationships with students with intellectual disabilities.

We are currently conducting an in-depth study of the effects of peer mentoring on students who serve as mentors. We are continually evaluating the type, amount, and quality of support

that mentors provide. Our future research will also investigate the effects of mentoring from the perspective of students with disabilities. Evaluation data and our ongoing observations suggest that peer mentors provide both instrumental and emotional supports that have assisted our students with intellectual disabilities to become academically successful in college coursework and socially integrated within the fabric of campus life. With varying levels of mentor support, students with IDD are successfully completing specialized and typical/inclusive coursework, are participating in campus organizations, clubs and activities, and are participating in career exploration and work experiences.

Summary

The Career and Community Studies Program is in its third year of providing inclusive post-secondary coursework and experiences for students with intellectual disabilities on the campus of the College of New Jersey. As a faculty, we are very impressed with the growth of our students, both socially and academically. It is an ongoing struggle for us to capture the varied and rich effects of a curriculum grounded in liberal learning upon students who, due to mistaken views of their abilities, previously had limited exposure to academically challenging coursework.

Access to meaningful post-secondary experiences for youth with intellectual and other developmental disabilities is an important new frontier in the process toward full inclusion for persons with disabilities. Post-secondary education is a necessary experience for many young people in that it supports the development of knowledge, skills, and relationships that foster financial and social success, civic participation, and, we would argue, quality of life.

The transition to adult life is a challenging experience for all young people. This transition is made more difficult for youth with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Our experience at the College of New Jersey suggests that students with IDD, when provided with appropriate adaptations, accommodations, and supports, can benefit substantially from a post-secondary experience in much the same ways that their non-disabled peers do. Moreover, students with co-occurring emotional and behavioral disorders appear to benefit from supportive relationships with faculty and peer mentors. Students who previously displayed socially inappropriate behaviors rapidly learn adaptive alternatives through instruction, modeling, and interaction with typi-

cal peers.

As College faculty, we like to think that our coursework is interesting, relevant and useful to our students in their pursuit of careers and satisfying lifestyles. In the time they spend with us, we hope to give them the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful, interdependent adults. However, we realize that much of the important learning that takes place on a college campus involves young adults learning from and supporting each other. Our experience with peer mentoring on a college campus suggests that the meaningful inclusion of youth with IDD can be achieved using this approach. Further research is needed to capture the multiple effects of peer mentoring for students with disabilities and their typical peers.

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