Added Value: Perspectives of student mentors working within a University-level inclusive education program

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of peer mentors who served in a mentor role for students with intellectual disabilities in a university-level educational program. The study used face-to-face interviews with eleven general-population students who had worked at least one semester as a peer mentor with students with intellectual disabilities. The interview transcripts and participant characteristics formed the study data. The qualitative transcript data was analyzed using the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis. Analysis of results was completed independently by two researchers. Analysis revealed two overarching categories comprised of seven overlapping themes. The two categories identified were enrichment of the mentors’ educational experience and enhancement of the University community. Themes for enrichment included gaining new skills, patience, challenges, personal satisfaction, and changed perspectives. Themes making up the enhancing of the University community were campus awareness and just students. Even though limited in scope, this study suggests that the implementation of inclusive programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities can have a positive influence on student mentors, as well as the university campus life.

Key words: Peer mentoring, intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, social growth, and postsecondary education.

INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) was enacted by the United States (U.S.) Federal Government in 1975 to ensure that all children (ages 3 – 21 years) with disabilities have the opportunity for a free public education. The law was reauthorized and updated by Congress in 2004 with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDIA) [1]. This inclusive education mandate for the public school systems in the United States (U.S.) has resulted in increasing numbers of individuals with intellectual disabilities who complete a high school education with the desire for postsecondary education or training programs that prepare them for careers [2]. However, for the approximately 3.9 million individuals with intellectual disabilities [3], there are limited options for continuing to postsecondary education. This limited number of postsecondary educational programs continues despite research showing that education is a significant predictor of success in careers for the general population [4]. When postsecondary educational options do exist, they are often at the community college or technical school level [5,6]. There is increasing recognition that the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities at the senior university level provides a unique opportunity for the student as well as the institution, yet, there are few programs that fully integrate these students into university life [7]. While there are 226 programs in the U.S. for individuals with intellectual disabilities [8], the Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth (Academy) was the first university-based educational program for the approximately 3,800

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individuals with intellectual disabilities who have completed high school in the State of Georgia [9]. To address the need for postsecondary education for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Georgia, the Academy was developed as a certificate program at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. The mission of the Academy is to provide an inclusive post-secondary opportunity for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The program is designed to encourage students to develop independence and manage all aspect of their lives and provides an inclusive academic, social, and wellness education to students at the university level who have previously been excluded from that opportunity. The Academy program allows students to explore career interests, work in actual jobs that support their career goals, participate in academic classes, as well as become part of university life on campus. Uditsky et al. [10] proposed that immersion of students with intellectual disabilities into community colleges and universities can promote life-long learning, enhanced self esteem, and development of social relationships.

A significant element of the Academy program is the use of peer mentors. Brown et al. [11] report that there are a wide range of definitions of mentoring described in the literature. Mentors’ roles are often specific to the setting and the desired outcome of the mentor-mentee relationship. Darling [12] defined a mentor as the Inspirer, the Investor, and the Supporter for an individual. Individuals with expertise and/or knowledge in a specific area can assume the role of a mentor for individuals new or unfamiliar with an organization or academic setting. The concept of mentoring as an effective approach to development in a variety of venues ranging from academic mentoring to mentorship in career development is well documented [13-17]. Additionally, research indicates that mentoring of students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary education has been shown to be a valuable component of an effective program [11,18].

The peer mentors for the Academy program are students who were recruited from the general university population. Many of the postsecondary programs for students with developmental and intellectual disabilities use peer mentors from the general university population [19]. Jacobi [20] wrote that mentoring encouraged “the growth and accomplishment of an individual, assisting in professional and career development, role modeling, psychological support, and the development of personal reciprocal relationships.” Including students with intellectual disabilities in academic and extracurricular activities can reduce discrimination and enrich the lives of traditional university students and the university as a whole [21, 22]. However, little research has been done regarding mentorship and postsecondary education with Brown et al. [11] finding only ten evidence-based research articles on the topic in their review of the literature. Further, a review of the literature reveals that no research can be found on the influence, if any, the students in postsecondary programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities have on their mentors and/or the general college student population.

According to McDonald et al. [23], there is a significant need for qualitative research on mentoring students of all ages with disabilities. It is important to evaluate the outcomes of inclusive postsecondary educational programs not only on students with intellectual disabilities in the program, but the effect of the mentoring experience on student mentors. Due to the lack of research on the influence that students in programs like the Academy have on their mentors and campus life, we undertook exploring this topic. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of peer mentors who had served in the mentor role for students with intellectual disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study used a key informant approach with face-to-face interviews with general-population Kennesaw State University (KSU) students who had worked as peer mentors for students with intellectual disabilities in the Academy. The theoretical underpinning for the methodological approach for the study was phenomenology [24, 25]. This approach sought to illuminate the experience and perceptions of the student peer mentors related to working with the Academy students. The study aim was to explore from the perspective of the student mentors the influence (positive or negative) of having a university-level educational program for young adults with intellectual disabilities on campus.

The program mentors play vital roles in the university integration process by assisting with academic assignments, attending classes and student work sites, and assisting in establishing acceptable behavior norms for the students. Mentoring sessions vary in length and focus depending on the specific focus the mentee is undertaking. It can include study sessions for class assignments, accompanying the mentee to their work site, and/or attending class with the mentee to provide support. The students in the Academy have the opportunity to fully participate in campus activities with most of the students living in student housing in an inclusive environment. Student peer mentors are recruited from the general university student population. Potential mentors are carefully screened by a staff committee and attend extensive training throughout the year. Mentors usually work with one mentee at a time so they can fully focus on that student. However, in some cases a mentor may work with a group of students in the study session format. Those mentors who have remained with the program over time often have had several
mentees as Academy students graduate or leave the program for some reason. Based on our experience, the mentors develop a strong bond with their mentee, and often have the closest observation of the student’s university experience both in the classroom and campus activities.

Participants in the study represented a convenience sample of general campus students who had worked as peer mentors to Academy students for at least one semester. Individual interviews were determined to be the most appropriate method of data collection because of the exploratory nature of the study and the potentially sensitive information being sought. Participants’ personal opinions and feelings were important to explore without potential influence from other mentors’ experiences or perceptions. Additionally, using the individual interview format allowed the participants to fully tell their stories in a confidential environment facilitating the researchers in obtaining more in-depth information about their experiences and feelings concerning working with Academy students and the overall program. Participants were able to individualize their stories, respond to questions, and interact freely with the interviewer.

Procedure

The study was conducted by two researchers who have had extensive training in conducting qualitative interview research. The researchers had no routine contact with the student peer mentor group or were part of the Academy implementation staff. Inclusion criteria for participating in the study were: (a) served as a student mentor to Academy students for at least one semester; (b) enrolled as a degree seeking student in the University; (c) able to speak and understand English; and (d) willing to provide informed consent. All peer mentors who were currently on campus (n=19) were informed by Academy staff of the study by e-mail and invited to participate. Peer mentors who indicated interest in participating in the study were put in contact with the research team and an appointment for the interview was arranged. Interviews were conducted in private conference rooms or study room. Before starting the interviews, an explanation of the study and its voluntary nature was provided. All participants were instructed that they could drop out of the study any time they wished or not answer any specific question that made them uncomfortable. They were told that they did not have to provide a name on any of the research study materials. It was explained that no names or identifying information would be linked to the data, and only composite data resulting would be reported.

If the potential participant agreed to continue in the study, informed consent was obtained and the interview was conducted. Prior to the interview beginning, each participant was asked to complete a short participant characteristic sheet. This sheet asked for information including: 1) their academic standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior); 2) gender; 3) age; 4) race/ethnicity. Participants were then asked to respond to a series of general, open-ended questions related to their experience working as a mentor. Eleven student mentors agreed to participate in the study. This represented approximately 52 percent of all student mentors who were currently working in the program. The primary reason for potential participants choosing not to participate in the study was that they were very busy trying to balance their own classes, work with Academy students, and other University commitments. A number of the students who had served as peer mentors in prior years had graduated and were not accessible to the research team. Each interview was audio recorded. No incentives were provided to the participants.

A predetermined semi-structured interview guide using open-ended questions and probes was used to conduct the interviews and assist the student mentors in describing their experiences, feelings, and challenges. The initial questions were purposefully broad to allow the participants to provide a context for the interview. Initially, participants were asked to explain how they had become involved in the Academy serving as a mentor. As the interviews progressed, the interview questions became more specific about their experiences with mentees and any challenges and/or outcomes that had resulted from working with their mentee(s). Participants were asked to share their feelings and perceptions about working with students in the Academy and what, if any, insights they had gained from their mentoring experiences. Additionally, they were asked to describe their experiences with the Academy students as they took part in campus life. After completion of the interviews, participants were asked if they had any questions for the researchers or wanted to share any other information with the researchers. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Following completion of each interview, a number was assigned to the study documents to link the audio-taped interview, informed consent form, the participant characteristic information sheet, and any observational notes. By the completion of the fifth interview, there was little new in the descriptions that participants provided related to their experiences in serving in their mentor role. This similarity in descriptions suggests that the researchers had captured the essence of participants’ experiences and obtained content saturation. However, six more interviews were conducted in an effort to ensure that the full range of experiences and perceptions of the mentor group was obtained.

Data Analysis

The audiotape of each participant’s interview was transcribed verbatim. Any information that had unintentionally been shared by the participants which might identify them or any of the Academy students was
removed during transcription. To ensure accuracy, the researcher conducting the interviews compared the typed transcripts against the original recordings and made any necessary corrections or clarifications to the transcripts. Transcripts of the audiotapes, field notes, and the participant characteristic information constituted the study data. The participant characteristics were examined using descriptive statistics. Frequencies, mean, and median scores, and ranges were obtained. Qualitative data analysis of the transcribed interviews was done using the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis [26]. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcripts. Key words and phrases from participants' descriptions of their experiences and feelings were defined, developed, and integrated into common themes [27]. Individual statements and phrases were then assigned to the developed themes to determine the adequacy of the coding schema. Overall, categories were constructed from the identified themes. Once independent analysis of the data was completed, the researchers compared their coding schemes and resolved discrepancies as to the themes and categories represented in the data [28]. Validation of the study results was accomplished using the criteria of credibility, fittingness, auditability, and confirmability recommended by Guba and Lincoln [29]. Credibility of the results was achieved by having selected participants check the themes and confirm their accuracy. Fittingness was achieved by having a member of the Academy staff, with experience working with Academy mentors, review the study findings. The data were audited by the third (independent) researchers who agreed with the decision trails, organization, and coding of the data. Confirmability exists if credibility, fittingness, and auditability are achieved [29].

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

The participants in the study consisted of 9 females and 2 males that ranged in age from 20 to 42 years with a mean age of 23.7 years (median age = 21). The participants represented a wide range of racial/ethnic backgrounds. Four of the participants were Caucasian; three participants reported being African-American; one participant was Haitian, two participants identified as South Asian, and one participant was Latino. Additionally, the participant group reported a wide range of majors including International Affairs/Business, Human Services, Psychology, Communications, and Anthropology/Gender Studies. The length of time the participants had worked with students in the Academy ranged from 4 months to 4 years. Eight of the participants had worked with the Academy students for 1 year or more. While none of the participants reported having any type of physical or intellectual disability, 9 of the participants reported having known someone in their personal life that had an intellectual disability. However, none of these 9 participants had worked closely with a person with an intellectual disability or had routine contact with them.

Qualitative analysis

Data analysis revealed two overarching categories comprised of seven overlapping themes or components. The two categories identified were: 1) enrichment of the mentors' educational experience, and 2) enhancement of the University community. Themes comprising the enrichment of mentors' education experience included: 1) gaining new skills, 2) patience, 3) challenges, 4) personal satisfaction and 5) changed perspectives. Themes making up the enhancing of the University community were: 1) campus awareness and 2) just students.

Enrichment of the mentors’ educational experience

The majority of the student mentors reported that they had become involved with the Academy of Inclusive Learning and Social Growth after being placed in the Academy for an internship, had seen a job posting on the University website or had been told about the program and opportunity to be a mentor by friends who had worked with the Academy. While several of the mentors were very interested in the Academy's work, the majority of the mentors reported not knowing much about the program or what to expect. As one mentor stated: "I was just looking for a job on campus and saw the mentor job advertised." The student mentors who were placed as interns for a course were all from the Department of Social Work and Human Services. One of these mentors reported that she was interested in doing the internship in the Academy because this would be a population which she would encounter in her future job in social service agencies. Despite the route the mentors took to become involved with the Academy, all of the mentors interviewed reported that this had turned out to be more than just a job or internship and had affected their educational experience. One mentor summed up the overall mentors' perspectives concerning working with the Academy by saying “I got a ton out of this experience.”

Gaining New Skills: A number of the mentors reported having gained new life skills that benefited them at the University as well as in their future jobs. All of the mentors felt that their experience in the Academy had taught them to work with individuals who were different from themselves and at times were challenging. One mentor said "I feel like it’s made me …able to do that [work with different people] because if I had not had this experience I still would be quick to judge and not evaluate my misconceptions [about other people].” Another mentor seemed to agree saying “I’ve learned a
Patience: A related theme that emerged from the data was the developed of increased patience when working with Academy students that transferred into their personal life. All of the mentors interviewed brought up the topic of developing patience in some context. One mentor recalled that when she took the mentor job she did not realize “the massive amount of patience it takes to work with them [Academy students]…I am short tempered in a lot of ways, but it’s really helped me, like, develop into a more patient person.” A second mentor commented “this [patience] isn’t something that, you can’t teach how to deal with people…you just have to learn to do it and have patience. You have to get your own experience through it.” A third mentor said “it has really taught me how to slow down, you know that I can’t be so fast, I have to break things down sometimes…It has allowed me to slow down and I need to.” One of the mentors who had children noted that it took developing patience to work successfully with Academy students. She reported that this new found patience had transferred to her personal life. She said “my daughter said since you took this job, you have become a much more patient person…”. One mentor summed up the general consensus of the participant group by saying “I mean it’s definitely helped my patience, but it, if anything, has like made my passion for working with special needs individuals grow, and it has just been an amazing experience.”

Challenges: Mentors reported that when they first became mentors they had a number of questions about their ability to do the job. Further, many reported challenges in learning to work the Academy students. One mentor said “I guess we all have, you know, preconceived notions [about individuals with intellectual disabilities]. I wouldn’t say I was judgmental, but just I didn’t really know what my expectations…just being part of this experience, you know, working with them closely on their assignments and it’s just blew me away.” A second mentor described her challenges as “…don’t know what kinds of boundaries need to be set between the mentor and the student.” Another student explained that “I have had a hard time learning how to break down material for the students and keeping up with grades and explaining to them why this isn’t right.” One of the mentors seemed to sum up the feelings of many of the mentors in saying “I had never had an experience like this…you know you may have to learn to deal with maybe 18 different disabilities. You have to learn how to talk to them individually and what to say and what not to say.” One mentor admitted that even though he was a psychology major, he was a little afraid of interacting with the Academy students in the beginning.

Personal satisfaction: The transcripts of the mentor interviews provided a clear picture of individuals who felt their experiences working with Academy students had provided them with a great deal of personal satisfaction. Mentors frequently described experiences that were rewarding, as well as reflected their pride in the students and their participation in the program. Despite any challenges or learning trajectory the mentors faced, one of them said “…because it’s not your typical college experience to work with special needs students, but I’m glad it’s become a part of mine because it’s something that I’m going to cherish for sure… I think, yeah, I think it’s played a huge part in me growing into a college student and leaving that high school person behind.” All of the mentors reported many instances where they experience a sense of satisfaction at the growth of their mentees, and pride in having been a part of this process. One mentor said “I’ve been able [to] watch them grow and going to see some of them graduate here, and I’m going to be leaving with them this year, and it’s just been a great, positive experience. I’ve loved it.” A second mentor supported this perspective by saying “I love seeing the students grow, especially seeing the first years [students], now becoming second years…it’s really fulfilling, uhm! it makes you feel like you’re doing something to better somebody else’s life.” A mentor who
had been with the program several years said “honestly, the main reason I’ve continued [as a mentor] is because it’s so rewarding…”

Many of the mentors described their experiences in terms of working with specific students and reported that there was a sense of excitement when students succeeded. One mentor described a situation which filled her with pride for the student. She said “…one of the students just got a job at…, but she just got a job at the mall, and her to have this job and to be really independent and to be going on the bus like, I was so proud and excited…” Another mentor reported her most memorial moment in the program as the success of a student on an exam that she completed on her own. She said “I was so…proud, at the time, I wasn’t her mentor, but she passed, made a 70 something or might have been a C exactly, on a college level exam, and that is major…I was super proud of her, everybody was super proud of her, and so when we have things like that, you really feel like you’ve done your job.” Other mentors described their feelings of accomplishment in seeing the students grow and become more part of the society. All of the students had countless stories of students growing and reaching new goals which gave the mentor a sense of pride and accomplishment. A mentor said “I think this experience has helped me as much as I have helped the students.”

Changed Perspective: Mentors discussions concerning their experiences working with the Academy revealed that the majority of the mentors reported that their experiences had changed their perspectives and/or attitudes about the disabilities and their own lives. As noted earlier, the vast majority of the mentors had no or limited interaction with anyone with intellectual disabilities. One mentor confided that prior to working with the Academy, he had been somewhat afraid of [student in the Academy]. He said “I was afraid of the student. Now, I realize [student] is just a regular person in every possible way, and my fear was totally unnecessary.” A second mentor said she had been referred by a friend to the mentor job because she just needed a job. However, knowing who she would be working with gave her some pause. “I was really reluctant at first, but after I got the job I’ve stayed with it because I just fell in love with it. I was thinking [before starting the job], okay, you can read all you want about some people who have intellectual disabilities….but it is really different when you start to interact with them, and when I did I was like, oh wow, they’re just like me.” After working with the students, two of the mentors commented that “…after working with the Academy, I would, I would rather have one of them be in charge of my agenda than myself, because some of them have insane memories that they can recall like, incredible things that I would never remember, just so many skills I was not aware of.” In addition to changing mentors’ attitudes about individuals with intellectual disabilities, some of the mentors reported that it had significantly changed their perspective about being at college. One mentor said “I gained uh! their perception of things, I get to see like, how they see college, and how excited they are to be here, and how much it means to them and then I’m here kind of procrastinating or slacking off and, I just see how hard they try and how important it is to them and it kind of keeps me in check…. It’s changed my [college] experience”. Other mentors reported that working with the Academy students had made them better students themselves. Another mentor seemed to agree with the other mentors saying “honestly, that [working with the Academy students] really changed my perspective on everything…there are times where I don’t go to class but they do. I do take it [my education] for granted and I procrastinate, I’ll do things last minute… to see the way they have grown, has helped me too since I am teaching them all of this, it’s like I have put this on myself too… it’s definitely affected my college life in that way, and it’s made me open up a new, a new eye, open up [a new mind].”

Several of the mentors reported that working with the Academy students has actually changed their career trajectory. For example, one of the mentors said “I mean it’s [being a mentor] completely changed my direction. It’s, I don’t know, it’s like inspired me and it’s what I want to do. I want to work with this population as career now.” Another mentor echoed this feeling saying “I mean, I think it might have inspired me to potentially look into a career path that’ll allow me to do this all the time.” Other mentors while not saying this job had changed their career path did feel that they would have no problem working in future jobs with individuals with intellectual disabilities. A mentor said: “I’ve had such a positive experience; I would be all for it.”

Enhancement of the University Community

The mentors participating in the study talked a great deal about their experiences with the Academy students and the effect the experience had on them personally. However, when asked to discuss the effect, if any, having the Academy students at the University had on campus life, they provided insight into this situation from their own observations. Overall, mentors believed that having the Academy on campus was a positive for the University. General students are exposed to a new level of diversity. One mentor said “For the most part, from what I’ve seen, people do really well. You can tell at first they are not entirely comfortable just because they don’t have experience with somebody with individuals with disabilities, but you can see that they try…for the most part [general students] interact with Academy students like ‘Oh yeah you can come sit with us, what classes are you taking?, what is your major?’” Another mentor who saw the students as an asset to the campus did
acknowledge that there are some general students that “just don’t get it.”

**Campus Awareness:** The idea that having the Academy students on campus would increase awareness of the population of individuals with intellectual disabilities emerged from all of the mentors’ discussions. Almost all of the mentors felt that there was limited awareness of the Academy Program among the general student population. One mentor said “when I tell people about my job, they say they had no idea this program was on campus… when I tell them, like, they want more information.” Another mentor felt that the program was “not well publicized.” A third mentor expressed her feeling about the Academy on campus saying “I think it would help the student body by like learning how to interact with people with disabilities because some people just don’t know how, they are uncomfortable.” She went on to say “just working with somebody who’s a little different, who thinks a little bit differently, different like we think. Like people are all accepting of like gays and stuff so it’s like being accepting of the thought process that doesn’t make any sense to you but makes perfect sense to them kind of deal.” Another mentor said “it’s just, I think, it would help people just understand how to work with just more different people, be more accepting…and know what is going to be like in the real world.”

The belief that the Academy students were a positive part of the campus was echoed by another mentor. He said “I think it’s a great thing to have them in the classrooms with like, uh, students you know, regular students attending college. It’s really wild to see other students reach out to them.” He went on to say “I’ve really appreciated the acceptance from our university [for the Academy students].” One of the mentors related that she was in a class with one of the Academy students before working in the Academy. She said “I took a music business class last semester, one of the students, just seeing how excited he always was because he LOVES music, like he worked at a music shop…I actually went to class with him, and just seeing how inclusive they really made him in the class, uhm! especially the professor…and everybody in the class I feel like, were really accepting.” While a few of the mentors had stories where there had been some instances that were not positive, they reported that these were not serious. One mentor expressed her experience saying “Like some students really receive it well [Academy students], then others don’t…they just don’t understand, and I think it comes from immaturity and them grasping bigger concepts in life, like, they are really narrow minded.” Another mentor described an experience where one of the Academy students “got up in front of that classroom and just did so great, and I think just seeing, I mean cause in the class you know even though the students aren’t pointed out that they are with the Academy…but to see the other students applaud him when he presented and know how difficult that probably was for him, I think made a difference.” A third mentor expressed her assessment saying “it’s overall having a positive effect. There’s still those jerks that are just like, oh! I’m going to feel superior because I don’t have a disability…but the majority of the reactions to the students being in the class are positive…and I think it is making people more, uhm! accepting… I think the exposure itself makes people like, oh yeah! this is a thing, okay, even if they don’t end up putting too much thought into it.” Another mentor described the positive effect the Academy students can have by saying “I’ve been in classes where people have said ‘Oh! I’m from small town U.S.A. and I’ve never seen a gay person or I’ve never seen a black person. So, just imagine what being in a classroom with an adult with developmental disabilities can do for them too. “…They could have never seen that before in their life, so this is a great way for them to, you know be exposed to that.” All of the mentors felt that awareness of the Academy needed to increase. They believed that the Academy students were having a positive impact on the attitudes of many of the general university students. Another student said “since they’re [Academy students] like integrated, like my friends come back to me with positive stuff, and I think it breaks the stigma.”

**Just Students:** Closely related to the theme of greater campus awareness of the Academy and people with intellectual disabilities was the feeling that the Academy students were just like other students once there was interaction. Mentors gave a number of examples where once general campus students were initially a little uncomfortable interacting with Academy students, but once they interacted they accepted the Academy student as just another student. One mentor related that “…because uhm! I can see people being a little like, hmmm! who are they?” …and then after a while, it’s like they’re laughing, they like hanging out, they are going to the Commons [dining hall], they are like more accepting and treat them like any other person. Ok, I accept you even though I think you’re a little weird, but then they start treating them like they don’t have a disability.” One mentor admitted that the Academy students integration into campus life has been a benefit for her. She said “they [students] want to know about what’s going on campus and they’re eager…there is no reason for me to walk around the way I do sometimes, ah! I don’t want to go do that, uhl who cares about that event they want to go and then I want to go [to campus events], I’ve gotten even more involved [in campus life] because of them.”

Mentors reported that the Academy students do not really always hang together out of the Academy. They have made other friends on campus and become involved in campus life. A mentor underscored this saying “I think it was a concert two weeks ago on campus green, uhm! I went there and I saw so many of them there, and to see them outside the Academy, seeing them interact
with just strangers, complete strangers was so surprising to me…I don’t always know what to do when I go to campus events, but to see them just participating so much and go and talk to all of these different booths and sign up for different things, that’s initiative, so you know, they are independent now and it tells you that they’re college students.” One of the mentors said “it is not such a strange thing to see them [Academy students] in the same spot as you…We’re all in it together; you know…we’re doing it together. I’ve taken this class, and now you’re taking this class, you know, so I think that’s awesome.”

One mentor said he has made friends outside the Academy with some of the students. He reported introducing one of the Academy students to a friend, who once he realized the student was in the Academy, said “Oh yeah! I knew [student name] last year, he played sports with us…he was really a cool guy.” It was clear from the mentors’ discussion of their experiences with Academy students that the students were becoming a part of campus life and making friends across the student body. One mentor said “It’s pretty awesome to think that they’re not confined to this clique…they are branching out, they’re doing their own thing, and they’re having a blast. They’re going to the student center playing pool after we finish here [mentoring sessions] and just hanging out with students. I think that’s, that’s, ha ha! that’s the cool part.”

DISCUSSION

The available research on educational experiences related to individuals with intellectual disabilities has focused on the perspectives of the students with disabilities or faculty working with these individuals [4, 30-32]. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to explore the effects of serving as a peer mentor to students with intellectual disabilities attending a two year postsecondary educational program. The experiences of peer mentors provide a unique and potentially valuable insight into the influence of having students with intellectual disabilities on a 4-year university campus. Peer mentors in their mentoring role interact with these students as advocates, peers, role models, and friends as described by Colvin and Ashman [33]. Kennesaw State University has inclusion and diversity as major tenets of its mission and strategic plan [34]. The University actively encourages students to learn about other cultures and traditions. This effort is highlighted by an active Global Institute that facilitates cultural events and study abroad opportunities. The Academy students represent a new level of diversity on the university campus that provides an opportunity for general campus students to learn about and interact with this population. The fully inclusive nature of the Academy is based on the belief that, with appropriate support, Academy students can become a positive influence on the campus. Peer mentors in this study reported that they believed that having the Academy students on campus was a positive influence for the peer mentors who worked with the students and the entire campus. The enrichment of the university community by having students with intellectual disabilities on campus was previously supported by Hardman and Clark [21] and Novak et al. [22]. Yet, there remains limited data or systematic evaluation to support the overall value of including individuals with intellectual disabilities in senior academic institutions. There remain some individuals in academia that may question the wisdom of including students with intellectual disabilities at the university level. The current study addresses this concern from the perspective of general population students who have worked closely with Academy students both in academic situations and campus life. The student peer mentors, as an essential part of the Academy Program, provided a unique group with whom to explore the influence of Academy students on the university experience of other students. Previous research has demonstrated that functioning as a mentor can be beneficial to both the mentor and the mentee, as well as provide valuable insight into the mentoring process [13, 17, 35]. The fact that all of the mentors who participated in the study felt they had greatly benefited from their experience was not expected. The level of passion the peer mentors had for working with the Academy students, and the sense of satisfaction they gained from helping the Academy students grow academically and socially were noteworthy. These findings are consistent with the position proposed by Penner [36] in viewing mentoring as a relationship where the mentor is not only concerned with their own success, but the success of their associates. Allen et al. [37] in exploring the mentor’s perspective on the mentoring process found that the desire to help others was a theme that emerged from their qualitative inquiry. Peer mentors acknowledged that there were challenges in learning to work with the Academy students and having to learn better time management [34]. However, the fact that a large number of the mentors returned to the mentor role semester after semester showed the positive nature of the mentoring experience. All of the study participants reported that they felt that their mentoring experience had helped them learn new skills, develop greater maturity, and gain a new perspective on their personal and academic life. A number of the peer mentors reported that they had developed new interpersonal skills such as patience that would translate positively to their personal lives and future careers. Several of the participants reported that after working with the Academy students, they had decided to redirect their academic focus and prepare to work with this population in their future careers. The above findings of the current study are consistent with previous research by Ferri [38] and McLean [39] who reported that peer mentors gained
better interpersonal and communications skills, expanded qualities such as patience and compassion, and learned to take on greater responsibility. Additionally, consistent with our findings, researchers have reported that being a peer mentor can positively influence career choices, their perseverance in achieving their educational goals, and their achievements in higher education [38,40,41].

Conclusion

Study results reveal that many students on the campus were not aware of the Academy program suggesting that greater effort should be made by Academy staff and university administrators to internally publicize the program to both students and faculty. The mentors' descriptions of observed interactions among the Academy students and the general campus population were generally positive. They indicated that they were not aware of any negative influence from the fully-inclusive approach of the program. In contrast, the mentors generally believed that having the Academy students on campus as “just another student” positively influenced the campus environment. The findings of this study while limited in scope provide a beginning understanding of the potential influence of having programs like the Academy on university campuses which is consistent with earlier studies. Clearly, further research is needed to assess academic and social outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities, their families, and educational institutions offering such programs. Future research would benefit from larger sample sizes, including students who did not return to the mentor role and triangulating the perspectives of peer mentors, students, and their parents. The findings of this study suggest that establishing postsecondary inclusive programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities may not just enhance the lives of program students, but may have the more general effect of enriching the educational experience of all students preparing them to more readily embrace differences as they enter the real world environment. Study results support that having the Academy students on the university campus “added value” to the peer mentors’ university experience and the university campus life.

It is important to note the limitations of the current study. Due to the exploratory nature of the study using a convenience sample with a small sample size, the results of this study should carefully be generalized to other programs or other educational institutions. Additionally, we did not have the opportunity to interview peer mentors who had graduated or left their mentoring roles in the Academy. However, the study does provide insight into the potential effects of the mentoring experience on student peer mentors, as well as the positive influence that integrating students with intellectual disabilities has on university campus life. Additionally, our findings document the positive influence that working with these students can have on peer mentors. Study findings provide important support for the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in 4-year universities. This study is a step in responding to the call for research on inclusive programs by McDonald et al. [23].

References


